



Author
**Kota
Nozomi**
Illustrator
029

**When
supernatural
Battles 8
Became
Commonplace**





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SENKOU HIGH CULTURAL FESTIVAL

PROGRAM

OPENING ACT

- | | |
|----|-------------------------------------|
| 1. | SPITE'S LABOR'S LOST |
| 2. | MUCH ADO ABOUT FANTASY |
| 3. | AS YOU LOATHE IT |
| 4. | WHAT STARTS WELL SHOULD END QUELLED |
| 5. | TAMING OF THE CREW |
| 6. | THE TRAGEDY OF ERRORS |
| 7. | THROH-THEH-LAW |
| 8. | ROMEO AND JULIET |

AFTERPIECE

Senkou High Cultural Festival Organizational Committee

CHARACTERS

ILLUSTRATOR: 029

Himeki
Chifuyu

**WORLD
CREATE**

A fourth-grade elementary schooler who spends all of her time hanging out in a high school literary club, for some reason. Her power, *World Create*, gives her the ability to create matter and space freely, and she's less than reserved about using it.

SWEET AND SOUR PINEAPPLE



**Kushikawa
Hatoko**

A childhood friend of Andou's, whose power, **Over Element**, gives her absolute control over the forces of nature. She never understands a single word that comes out of Andou's mouth.

**OVER
ELEMENT**

**DARK
AND
DARK**



**Andou
Jurai**

A boy with a pathological case of chuunibyou and a love of supernatural battles that dates back to long before he obtained his own power. His power, **Dark and Dark**, lets him create lukewarm black fire... and nothing else.

**Takanashi
Sayumi**

The mild-mannered and erudite president of the literary club. She's all but mastered her power, **Route of Origin**, which allows her to return anything and everything to the way it's meant to be. She mostly just uses it to mess with Andou, though.



**ROUTE
OF
ORIGIN**

The wielder of **Closed Clock**, a supernatural power that lets her manipulate time. A closet nerd with the rare ability to keep up with Andou's delusional ramblings.

**CLOSED
CLOCK**



**Kanzaki
Tomoyo**

Opening Act

“Hey, Cookie?”

This happened a little before summer vacation. I think it was the day after I made up with Cookie...or maybe two days? It was recess time, and I was talking with Cookie in our classroom.

“Yes? What is it, Chii? Is something wrong? You know you can tell me if you have *any* problems, right? They call me your mom for a reason, after all! I’ll hear you out, no matter what you ask me for!”

“I have a question.”

“You do? Well, go right ahead! Ask away!”

“What’s a lolicon?”

Cookie fell over. She slammed right into the classroom’s floor. It looked like it really hurt.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine, Chii... I was just a little surprised. So, umm, why are you asking about *that* all of a sudden...?”

“I’m just curious.”

It looked like the question was bothering Cookie a little. “Don’t you, umm...already *know* what that word means, Chii?”

“I sort of know,” I said. “Lolicons are boys who like little girls.”

“Oh, so you *do* get it! That’s exactly right. Lolicons are creepy boys who have *weird* thoughts about little girls like us! They’re terrible, *terrible* people!”

“They’re bad people?” I didn’t really understand. “All lolicons are bad?”

“That’s right!”

“Why?”

“Well, because...because they just are! Of course they are! The law says that that stuff’s not okay! Adults aren’t supposed to like little girls like that, and anyone who does is a total freak!”

“Why are they freaks?” I just didn’t understand. “Why does liking little girls make them freaks?”

“I-It... It just does! Lolicons are freaks!” Cookie shouted. “Don’t you remember what the principal told us at that assembly the other day? There’ve been more and more people lately targeting elementary school girls like us and doing awful things to them! Everyone who commits a crime like that is an awful lolicon freak!”

I didn’t say anything. Cookie looked at me.

“Chii... Did something happen between you and Andou? Is that why you’re asking me about lolicons?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. Andou helped me and Cookie be friends again, but after that, everyone in the literary club started calling him a lolicon, or “the lolicon knight,” sometimes. That’s why I got curious and decided to ask Cookie. I wanted to know what lolicon *really* meant.

“I *knew* this had to be Andou’s fault again! Agggh, that stupid pervert! First he goes and comes out as a lolicon as if that’s something to be *proud* about, and now he’s trying to trick you into thinking that lolicons *aren’t* a bunch of freaks...? What a *scumbag*! I just *knew* I couldn’t let him go unchecked... At this rate, my dear little Chii’s going to be totally ruined...”

I could sort of tell that Cookie was misunderstanding something. She was getting mad, but I was trying to think. I thought and thought...but I still didn’t understand.

Why is it bad to be a lolicon?

Why is it not okay for grown-up boys to like little girls?

And, thinking about it the other way around...

Is it not okay for little girls to like grown-up boys?

Scene 1. Spite's Labor's Lost

"*Renaissance!*" I declared authoritatively in our club room after school. "What we need is a *renaissance*! The time has come for our rebirth—for us to turn back the clock, return to our roots, and start anew!"

About a week had passed since summer vacation had wrapped up and the second semester of school began, and the usual crowd were all gathered up in our venerable literary club's room. Yes, indeed! We, a collection of individuals so terribly potent we could stand on even terms with the gods themselves and turn the world on its head, had gathered together in one place!

The sovereign ruler of time: Kanzaki Tomoyo!

The lord of all elements: Kushikawa Hatoko!

The magus of space... Wait, no, that sounds too much like the sort of title they give to the expert architects in those home remodeling shows. Gimme a second... Hmm... Ah, okay!

The priestess of genesis: Himeki Chifuyu!

The bringer of renaissance... No, no, hold up again. That's a total no-go—I already used that word in my intro! If I say it again here, it'll make it sound like all that stuff was alluding to Sayumi's power! That's not what I was going for at all, honest! I meant it in the totally literal "rebirth" sense! So, okay, what can I...? Ah, got it!

She who denies nature's flow: Takanashi Sayumi!

...Okay, that one *might've* gotten away from me a little, but meh, it works. I based it, of course, off the words of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "Panta rhei," that is, "Everything flows"! It means, well... Y'know, it's basically one of those impermanence things. All things must pass, and all that jazz. It's just one of the many terms I learned in ethics class...but still, it's just sorta *great*, isn't it? The mere fact that it's an ancient Greek thing makes it so awesome, I can hardly stand it! Ancient Greece: hella cool!

But I digress.

Four girls, within each of whom dwelled powers far beyond the extraordinary, had assembled here today. But there was still one more member of their circle. One last clubmate—a boy—whose presence could not possibly be discounted. It was he, a heaven-sent child of devastation, who led those fearsomely empowered girls onward, fated to guide them all the way to the final paradise of the soul, Tír na nÓg!

The Bloody Darkness. The Lord of Thanatos. The Knock on Hell's Door. The Umbral Tempest. The Sovereign of Sin and Damnation. The Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel. The King of the Cosmic Apocalyptia. He Who Mocks Death. Paradise Lost. The myriad atrocities that fallen hero had wrought had earned him innumerable titles to match. He was the conqueror of chaos with one arm wreathed in the accursed, stygian flames of purgatory. And his name...was Guiltia—

“Would you *please* stop shouting out of nowhere like that, Andou?!”

“What’s wrong, Juu?”

“Andou, you’re too loud.”

“Remarkable. Summer vacation is over, the weather is cooling down, and yet *you’re* still full of hot air.”

...Well, okay. He was going by the assumed name of Andou Jurai, for the time being. Nobody was willing to call him by his *true* name yet, but it didn’t really feel like true names should be thrown about willy-nilly anyway, so it all worked out for the best in the end. That’s what I told myself, anyway.

Meanwhile, Tomoyo shot me a frigid glare. “What’s all this ‘renaissance’ stuff about, anyway?” she asked. “Are you making up a new special move, or a title, or whatever?”

“What?! No! Why would *that* be the first thing you’d assume?!” I snapped.

“I mean... Duh? Isn’t that always what you’re doing when you start throwing around big words like that?”

“I use big words the way they’re meant to be used sometimes too!”

“Okay, but you’ve gotta admit that you’re arguing against some serious precedent here,” Tomoyo said with a fed up shrug.

“Ugh... Well, *you* talk a pretty big game for someone who’s still doing her summer homework,” I countered.

“O-Oh, stuff it!” Tomoyo shouted with a blush. Her math textbook, incidentally, was lying on the table in front of her. The second semester had started a week ago, yet somehow, she apparently wasn’t finished with the work she *should’ve* gotten done over our break. As such, she’d been using her club time to diligently chip away at what was left, and today was no exception. “I’m *basically* totally done, anyway! This is all I have left!” Tomoyo added.

“Yeah, but *basically* done isn’t done, and it’s been a week. That’s the whole problem.”

“My class’s math homework isn’t even due till tomorrow, so it’s fine!”

Each subject gave us an assignment over the summer, and each assignment had its own due date attached to it. Some of our teachers said it was fine to turn our homework in on the first proper day of classes, while some demanded that we hand it in right after the opening ceremony. Our math teacher fell into the former category, and since Tomoyo’s first math lesson was tomorrow, she was doing her best to squeak in within that limit...while on the other hand, *my* first math class had happened the day after the opening ceremony. Life’s just not fair sometimes.

“A-And besides...whose fault is it that I couldn’t focus on my homework, anyway?” Tomoyo muttered.

“Huh? I mean, yours?”

“Okay, yes! Yes, you’re right, but... Ugggh,” she moaned, clutching at her head for reasons that eluded me.

It was around then that Sayumi let out a sigh. “So then, Andou,” she said, “What *did* you mean when you started yelling about a renaissance?”

“*Right!* Back to the point! Thank you, Sayumi!” I shouted. I’d let myself get distracted by all that homework talk, but now I was back on course! “I’m saying that a renaissance is exactly what we need! Or, like, that we shouldn’t forget

our roots or our original driving resolve... Basically, I'm saying that the time has come for us to take a long, hard look in the mirror and reevaluate our course!"

"Oh?" Sayumi said.

"Maybe it was summer vacation's fault. We were on break for so long, it feels like we've, like...lost sight of ourselves, y'know? And that's why we need to take a moment for some real, proper inner dialogue!"

"*Oh,*" Sayumi sighed. The look on her face was about as skeptical as looks could get, and the other club members were reacting in much the same way.

"Andou?" said Sayumi. "I would appreciate it if you would make it more clear whether you're being serious or trying to put on some sort of comedy sketch. It's very hard to react to you when your motivations are so ambiguous."

"Of *course* I'm being super serious right now!"

"A comedy sketch it is, then."

"Wait, since when was me being serious code for comedy?!"

"I just have to make it clear that if you're going to be a clown, you should feel free to clown away, and if you're going to be quiet, you should do so without raising a fuss first."

"Are *those* my only options?! What, so I'm not allowed to talk at all unless I'm being a clown?!"

"More precisely, my hope is to forbid you from talking unless you have a truly, exceptionally, gut-bustingly hilarious routine in mind."

"So shutting up's literally my only option! Great!"

As a sidenote—not that it matters, like, at all—"forbid" is *such* a good word to drop into casual conversation! It's such a simple word, but it has so much *heft* to it in spite of that! Actually, while we're on the subject, simple but dramatic words are great in general. Take, say... Okay, take "keen" for example. So simple, yet so *sharp* at the same time somehow! Of course, my personal favorite will always have to be "sin." It's just three letters, as basic as it gets, but the sheer *weight* those letters carry! Whoever came up with that word was seriously a genius! Sin: *hella* cool!

“So, Andou, what exactly have you been trying to tell us with all of this?” Sayumi said, once again steering us back on track. We were having a really hard time moving the conversation forward today.

“Ahh. Umm, okay,” I said. “I get the feeling that none of you are really following me here, so I’m gonna back up and explain this from the top.”

The origin of this whole affair—the spark that ignited my desire for renaissance—lay in today’s club activities, which I proceeded to recount.

“Where to begin... Ah, yes. It was the age when gods still walked the earth and man lived by their side—an age before the entity that would come to embody evil itself had been born into this world... In terms of concrete time, it was, oh, about ten minutes ago...”

“Andou. Stop,” said Chifuyu.

“Right, sorry,” I sheepishly replied, then I started telling my story like a normal person. The story of a perfectly ordinary day in the literary club, starting about ten minutes ago...

“Hey guys,” I said as I casually strolled into the club room after school. Tomoyo and Hatoko had arrived before me.

“Heyo, Juu!” Hatoko cheerfully replied.

“Huh? Sure,” Tomoyo grunted indifferently. She was working on her homework and apparently not paying much attention to anything else.

“I was just about to make some tea! I bought some kinda pricey tea leaves yesterday, and I brought them with me to share with everyone,” Hatoko said as she stood up and walked over to where we kept our teapot and electric kettle. She scooped her tea into the pot and tried to fill it with hot water, but after just a few moments, the kettle’s glugging turned into more of a comical sputter, and the flow came to a halt. “Oh, whoops! It’s empty, I guess...? Oh no, what should I do now...?”

“Well, don’t panic, to start,” I said. “This would be a disaster if you were making instant ramen, but you’re just brewing tea, right? Not a huge deal.”

“It *is* a huge deal, though! When you brew this sort of green tea, you’re supposed to pour the water in all at once, then serve it right afterward! It gets gross and bitter if you let it steep for too long!”

“Huh. I’m a coffee guy, so that’s news to me. In fact, I’m *such* a coffee guy I refuse to drink the stuff unless it’s served pure and black!”

“Nobody asked and nobody cares, so stop being such a tryhard poser,” Tomoyo muttered from the sidelines, but I ignored her.

“I’ll go get some more water!” Hatoko said, then she dashed out from the club room with the kettle in hand. Apparently, she was really set on brewing the best tea possible for me.

“It’s nice that she cares and all, but I can’t really tell good tea from bad tea in the first place,” I muttered as I sat down across the table from Tomoyo. “I mean, when I buy bottled tea, I pick one of the ones that comes with a little bonus trinket, not one that I think actually tastes better than the others.”

“Can relate, honestly,” said Tomoyo.

“Come to think of it, I can’t tell the difference between fresh-brewed tea and the bottled stuff, period.”

“That’s just because the bottled stuff is actually good these days.”

“And I know they’re not everyone’s cup of tea, but if you ask me, series that just resteep the used leaves of past works still make for fine brews.”

“Andou, what’s *that* got to do with the price of tea in China?”

“By the way, Tomoyo, how do *you* feel about green tea?”

“I’m more of a black tea person, myself. Though of course, I only ever drink Earl Grey... Ah!” Tomoyo gasped with a start, but it was too late. I could feel the gleeful grin spreading across my face already. “*Oh* no! Nuh-uh! This is *nothing* like your ‘I only drink black coffee and that makes me hella cool’ shtick!” she shouted.

“Uuuh *huh*...”

“I-I mean, well... I-I might’ve started drinking Earl Grey because I saw it in a manga and thought it would make me cool, but, like... I drink it these days

because I actually like how it tastes! That's the only reason!"

"Oh, I know, I know," I said. "I can fill the blanks in myself, believe me."

"Stop acting so friggin' *understanding*, you jerk!"

"Characters who have super specific taste in tea come across as so *regal*, right? Makes you wanna go all 'Spare me the lemon, please. You'll *devastate* the tea's natural charm,' and 'You drink *milk* tea? What are you, a child?' and stuff!"

"I *just* said that I only like how it tastes these days!"

"Yeah, I get you! Something about having a super specific preference that you refuse to compromise on just gives the greatest feeling of, like, *exclusivity*, right? You could only listen to western music, or only play doubles in tennis, or only read *Crime and Punishment*! The possibilities are endless!"

"*Listen* to me, dammit!" Tomoyo shouted as she sprang to her feet with just a little *too* much enthusiasm and collided with the table, knocking the cup of tea she'd been drinking clean over. "Ah, crap!"

"Whoa! You okay over there?" I asked.

"Ah, yeah, it's fine. It was basically empty anyway," Tomoyo replied.

She was right—there'd been barely any tea left to spill in the cup in the first place. What little *had* dripped out hadn't gotten on her homework or the floor, so it was easy enough to wipe it up with a tissue.

Coincidentally, Hatoko returned with a full kettle just as Tomoyo finished cleaning, and she brought Sayumi along with her. I figured they must've bumped into each other in the hallway.

"Our poor little kettle's been acting up a bit lately," said Hatoko. "Sometimes it stops heating the water up properly, so the tea ends up being lukewarm instead."

"That kettle's been here since before I joined the club, so I suppose that's no surprise. It's simply reaching the end of its life span," said Sayumi.

"Do you think so? Maybe we could use some of our club funds to buy a new one...? No, no, they'd never let us get away with that, would they?" Hatoko

asked.

“Using club funding would be rather questionable, but I should be able to bring a new one from home for us, actually,” said Sayumi. “My father was given an electric kettle once. The exact circumstances escape me at the moment, but regardless, it’s been sitting in our storage unused ever since.”

“Oh, really? Hooray! That’s perfect!” Hatoko said with a beaming smile, then she turned to look at me. “Did you hear that, Juu? We’re getting a new kettle! I’m so excited! Oh, I know—why don’t we give it a name? Giving things names is a great way to remind yourself to take good care of them, after all!”

“Whoa there, Hatoko,” I said. “Are you seriously saying you want to *name* a household appliance? You *do* know you’re gonna have to grow up and move on from that kid stuff someday, right?”

“Whaaat? But you name stuff all the time! Like your bicycle!”

“I...” I began, then paused. This, presumably, was what people meant when they said they’d been backed into a conversational corner. “I, umm, I... R-Right! It’s not like I *choose* all those names myself! Those names were fated to be, perceivable only by the chosen few! I guess you could say I pick up on them with my sixth sense, y’know...?”

“Andou? I’m sorry to bring this up when you’ve been called out so thoroughly you’ve been rendered beet red from the shame of it all,” Sayumi said in that classic tone that made it impossible for me to tell whether she was being incredibly polite or incredibly scathing as she pointed to the sleeve of my jacket, “but the button on your cuff is about to fall off.”

“Huh...? Oh, it really is! When’d that happen?” I wondered out loud.

“Presumably when you decided to roll your sleeves up in an attempt to make yourself look cool,” said Sayumi.

“Ugh!”

“You certainly are a troublesome underclassman to take care of sometimes,” she sighed. “Well, come on, take it off and hand it over. I’ll fix it for you.”

The combo of strictness and kindness she had going on got the better of me,

and I obediently handed her my jacket. Sayumi pulled out a sewing kit from her bag and got to work right away, stitching the button back on with a practiced hand. As she worked, the door to the club room slid open and Chifuyu walked inside.

“Oh, hey, Chifuyu,” I said.

“Mnh,” Chifuyu grunted as she trotted over to us with Squirrely held tightly in her arms. Her eyes were just about half closed, and she looked like she might fall asleep at any second. She seemed at *least* thirty percent sleepier than usual, or thereabouts.

“You okay, Chifuyu? You look really sleepy,” I said.

“I’m okay,” said Chifuyu. “I walked here, so I’m a little tired. I’m gonna take a nap.”

“Evening’s a little late for a nap, but you do you,” I said. Napping in the club room was nothing new for Chifuyu, so I didn’t bother questioning it too deeply.

Chifuyu tottered her way over to a corner of the room and pulled out two folding chairs. She unfolded them, faced them in opposite directions, pushed them together, then clambered onto the semienclosed space that they formed. She was tiny enough that those two seat cushions made for a perfectly adequate impromptu bed.

“Are you, uh, sure you wanna sleep like that, Chifuyu? I’d be worried about falling off if I were you,” I said.

“I’m okay. It’ll work just fine,” she said as she gave me a thumbs-up.

“There you go, Andou,” said Sayumi, holding my jacket out to me. “I’d appreciate it if you’d learn from this experience and be more careful about rolling up your sleeves in the future.”

“Thanks, Sayumi,” I said as I accepted the jacket, then looked around the room as I put it back on. “Well, I guess all five of us made it today,” I mumbled...then shot to my feet. I glanced around again, verified that everyone was looking at me, then made my authoritative declaration!

“*Renaissance!*”

...And now that the opening line's been dropped again, flashback time's over!

"So, that's pretty much the whole story. I'm sure all of you understand what it is I'm trying to say by now, don't you?"

"No. Like, not at *all*," Tomoyo replied curtly.

The others reacted in pretty much the same way, except for Chifuyu, who was sleeping like a log. *Guess I might've dragged that flashback out a little too long for her.*

"Ugh—but how could this be?! How could I explain the situation so clearly and thoroughly yet have *nobody* else notice the clear and looming abnormality that lurks among us?!"

"Okay, Andou," said Tomoyo, "just fess up. What are you getting at? What's so weird? I can't see anything strange about anyone! Everything's totally normal here, I'm telling you."

Totally normal? Yes, indeed—everything is, in fact, totally normal. We'd been living like utterly ordinary high schoolers, each and every day so perfectly unremarkable they didn't even merit description. That casual, commonplace normality, however, was *in and of itself* the true identity of the *abnormality* I'd singled out. For us, *nothing* could be less normal than normality.

"Okay, people, listen up! Listen with all your hearts and souls—listen to the words that *my* soul is crying out from the bottom of *my* heart!"

I took a deep breath...then shouted with all of my everything.

"We haven't been using our powers, like, at *all* lately, have we?!"

Yup. I said it. I finally, *finally* said it. *Somebody* had to do it, and at long last, I was the one who bit the bullet and put it out there.

"Oh..."

"Right..."

“Zzz.”

“Ugh...”

Tomoyo, Hatoko, and Sayumi all responded to my soul-wrenching wail with looks of awkward disinterest. Their faces just *screamed* “Oh, now that you mention it, I guess that’s true.” Chifuyu, meanwhile, was still asleep.

“Oh, come *on*, guys! You’re acting like you don’t care about this at all! What gives?!” I shouted.

“I mean, if I’m gonna be brutally honest, we *don’t* care at all,” said Tomoyo. “Right, Hatoko?”

“I mean, it’s not like not using my power causes me any problems, so...” Hatoko said with a shrug.

“This isn’t about whether or not it causes *problems!*” I shouted. “We’ve awakened to supernatural powers, dangit! *Supernatural powers!* And we’re not even *using* them! We should be constantly drilling and polishing our abilities just in case we ever need them! Life is a battle—which means, of course, that *everything* is a battle—and that means that every moment of our daily lives is an opportunity to train ourselves! We should be using our powers so much that we can manipulate them as easily as we move our own limbs! We should be able to invoke them as naturally as we breathe!”

I got a little heated over the course of my explanation, but that was only natural. In the week since summer vacation had ended, we of the literary club had returned to our plodding, commonplace, by the numbers daily lives...and we had used our powers so infrequently, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say we’d abandoned them entirely. Our god-tier abilities were just resting on the shelf, collecting dust! We hadn’t even been wasting them on petty nonsense!

If this wasn’t a classic case of pearls before swine, I didn’t know *what* it was. We hadn’t made any enemies in particular since we’d awakened to our powers, sure, but using them to play around was, like...it was a *rule!* We’d *talked* about this! Not just a rule, even—it was our law! Our very destiny! It was, well...it was the whole friggin’ *premise*, dangit!

“The fact of the matter is that, by and large, we can’t use our powers in front of anyone outside our group,” said Sayumi. “Allowing ourselves to use them for frivolous purposes only within this club room became something of a tacit rule over the long term, so over the course of summer vacation—a period in which we didn’t visit this room at all—we had virtually no opportunities to make use of our powers. As such, even though school has begun again, we’re still in the habit of not bothering with them.”

“That’s right, Juu,” Hatoko piped up as soon as Sayumi had finished her cool, detached analysis. “Plus, there haven’t been any good chances for us to use our powers today in the first place, have there?”

“Fool! *Imbecile!*” I bellowed, my fists clenched with rage! “Listen up, Hatoko. You can’t just *wait* for life to hand you opportunities on a silver platter! You have to reach out and grasp them yourself!”

“Oooh! That almost sounded like you were quoting someone!” said Hatoko.

“And for us, that means taking every conceivable chance we’re given to use our powers, no matter how petty it might be!”

“That...doesn’t sound quite right,” replied Hatoko.

I couldn’t push through Hatoko’s skepticism with pure momentum...but that didn’t stop me from keeping that momentum going! “There was a *mountain’s* worth of opportunities to use our powers in the first ten minutes of club alone! Fortunately for you, you have a world-renowned supernatural power counselor—me—here to explain to each of you, one by one, exactly what chances you let slip past you.”

“Excuse me, ‘supernatural power counselor’? Could a title get any shiftier?” Tomoyo jabbed.

“Congratulations, Tomoyo! Your feckless nitpicking has earned you the opportunity to go first!”

“Who’re you calling feckless?!”

Kanzaki Tomoyo: bearer of *Closed Clock*, the power to turn the very concept of time into her personal plaything, twisting it to her will. Now then, let us look back over Tomoyo’s behavior today with the capabilities of her power in mind!

When I walked into the room, she was working on her homework. Hatoko went out for water, we talked about tea, and then Tomoyo knocked over her teacup—and *there!* *That's* where the opportunity was missed!

“Why would *you* of all people spill your tea?!”

“What else was I supposed to do?”

“Oh, I dunno, *stop time*?!”

“Oh...right. Yeah, I guess I could've done that. Slipped my mind.”

“It slipped your mind? It *slipped* your *mind*...? Are you even *trying* anymore? What's the point of a character with the power to stop time at will if they just *forget* they can do it at the worst possible moment and get whooped? That's a great way to make your readers give up on you! Do you *want* to make them so frustrated they'll chuck the book at a wall?”

I was in such utter and complete despair that I fell to my knees. “You have the power to *stop time*, for crying out loud! That's one of the most top-tier, terrifyingly OP abilities to be found in anime and manga! That's the sort of power that only final bosses, secret bonus bosses, and the strongest character in the series get to have! You have a power like *that*...and you lost to a *teacup*?!”

“I didn't *lose* to anything!”

“And that's only the start of it! If you have total dominion over time, then why're you still working on your summer homework?! How can someone who manipulates time be so bad at managing it?!”

“Those are *totally* different things! And stop giving me crap about my homework!” Tomoyo shouted. She was furious, but I kept going, trying to appeal to her by way of sheer sincerity.

“Please, Tomoyo,” I said. “I know you're the same as I am. You're the sort of person who loves supernatural powers from the bottom of her heart, aren't you? Have you lost interest in your own power? Have you lost the love you once held for it? Don't you remember how much effort you put into practicing it back in the day?”

“Huh...?” Tomoyo blinked. “When did I ever practice using my power? When I stop time, it just sorta *happens*. I don’t remember ever putting in any real effort...”

“Are you kidding?! You put so much effort into learning how to snap your fingers!”

“Wha— Why you— *Hey!*” Tomoyo sputtered incoherently as her face flushed bright red in a flash.

When Tomoyo activated her power and stopped time, more often than not, she made a point of snapping her fingers. The idea was that doing so was the trigger for invoking her power...though, of course, she didn’t *have* to snap at all. She could stop time without it, no problem. As to why she bothered snapping anyway...I mean, I think that pretty much goes without saying at this point.

“I get you, honestly,” I said. “Like, I *really* get it. You need *something* to use as a trigger for activating your power, like reciting an invocation or carving a seal into your body!”

“How many times have I told you not to act so *understanding* about this crap?!” Tomoyo shouted. “It’s not what you think... It’s not, honest... I wasn’t trying to show off or anything... I just, umm, I mean...”

“At first, the best you could make was a sad little *pft*, but you’ve been getting so much better lately! You’ve worked your way up to a real *thwap*, haven’t you?!”

“Whaddya mean, *thwap*?! Like hell I have! Do you have any idea how much time I’ve spent on this?! I can *totally* make a proper snap these... Ah. Umm, I mean... I-I didn’t practice at *all*! I just realized I could do it out of nowhere, at some point... I-I mean, huh? What are you talking about? Have I ever even snapped my fingers before? I can’t remember at *all*!”

Tomoyo was glancing frantically around the room, looking for something—anything—that could get her out of this. I laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Tomoyo. Everyone in this club understands how much effort you’ve put into practicing your finger snaps, day after day.”

“No way?!” Tomoyo yelped, then spun around to look at Hatoko and

Sayumi...who were both smiling at her in the most forced, least genuine way possible. She'd been *really* into practicing her snaps for a very long time, and although it seemed she'd been trying to hide it, she must've accidentally made it into a habit. Every once in a while, she'd start snapping away without even seeming to realize it. "No, I didn't... It's not like— I mean, I never... I... I... *Graaahhhhhh!*"

In a split second, Tomoyo vanished. *Now*, apparently, was the right time to use *Closed Clock* in her mind. I wondered where she'd gone for a moment, but it didn't take me long to notice that she was curled up into a fetal position in the corner of the room, moping.

"I'm never, *ever* snapping my fingers again," Tomoyo moaned.

"Don't give up!" I said. "Now's the time to redouble your efforts, Kanzaki Tomoyo! As long as you keep putting in the time and energy, there will come a day when you could be wearing gloves and *still* pull off a perfect finger snap! Don't you want to be like the Flame Alchemist?!"

"...Colonel Mustang isn't actually snapping his fingers when he does that. The snap's just elements in the air reacting when he does his transmutations. That's canon, by the way—it's in a fan book called *FMA Research Lab DX*."

Well, crap! That was one heck of a laser-guided callout. I was a big *FMA* fan, but not *quite* big enough to have read the fan books. Anyway, the fact that I'd just accidentally shown off inaccurate manga trivia was making me feel pretty awkward, so I decided to bring Tomoyo's turn to a close and spin to face my very own childhood friend.

"All right—it's your turn next, Hatoko!"

"Okaaaay," Hatoko replied in a carefree tone that told me she had *no* idea how grave of a sin she'd already committed that day.

Kushikawa Hatoko: bearer of *Over Element*, the power to transcend the elements and wield each and every one of them however she saw fit. She had complete, undisputed mastery over fire, water, earth, wind, *and* light, manipulating them with total impunity...which begged a very serious question.

"Why the heck would you bother going out to refill a kettle *by hand*?!"

“Huh? Well, the kettle was getting all gurgly, so someone had to.”

“So *make* water! You can literally shoot it out of your hands! Hell, why bother with the kettle in the first place?! You can just make the water hot to begin with!”

I knew from experience that Hatoko was capable of adjusting the temperature of the water she created—she could make steam and ice just as easily as she could room temperature water. She could even roll her other elements into the equation and make the water as hard or soft as she wanted it to be. She was probably even capable of pulling a trick that turned up surprisingly often in battle manga: creating perfectly, one hundred percent pure water, which electricity couldn’t actually flow through.

“You could *definitely* make water that tastes way better than a school’s tap water, right?”

“Well, I *could*,” said Hatoko, “but for some reason, I just don’t want to drink the water I make with my power. It just doesn’t feel...I don’t know, potable?”

Huh. Well, I guess I kinda get where she’s coming from there. Drinking or eating stuff that you made with your own power to keep yourself going just felt...a little *wrong*, for some reason I couldn’t quite articulate. Chifuyu had told me that she never wanted to eat food that she made with her power either, and Natsu Dragneel didn’t eat his own fire as well.

“Anyway, Hatoko, there’s a more fundamental question we have to deal with here,” I said. “Do you even remember your own power’s name?”

“O-Of course I do!” said Hatoko with a confident nod...followed by a pause, after which she crossed her arms and sank into thought.

Yup. She’s definitely forgotten it.

“Umm... Was it... *Oven Energy*?”

“No! What sort of name for a power is *that*?! This is a *battle* power, not a power from some cooking anime! It’s *Oven Element*, dangit!”

“Oooh, *that’s* it! Right, I remember now! *Oven Element*! I’ve got that totally memorized now!”

“Good. I’d better not catch you forgetting it again! Yes, *Oven Element*...such was the name I bequeathed upon your abhorrent power.”

A moment of silence passed by.

“...Like friggin’ *hell* it was! It’s *Over Element*, not *Oven Element*!” *Hooooly crap, that was close! I almost let that one stand!*

“*Oven Element, Oven Element,*” Hatoko happily sang to a jaunty little tune she’d made up. I *should’ve* sat her down then and there and explained to her how incredibly cool of a name *Over Element* was, but she just looked so darn *pleased* with herself that I couldn’t bring myself to go through with it. I decided to give up and move along.

“All right, next up... Sayumi!”

“Yes?” our resident upperclassman and club president replied with a look of pure, unshakable calm on her face.

Takanashi Sayumi: bearer of *Route of Origin*, the power to return anything and everything to the form she believed it belonged in—to the way it was meant to be.

“Fixing something that’s broken should be the easiest thing in the world for you...so why on earth would you need to bring in a *new* electric kettle from home?!” I shouted. “Just fix the one we already have! Make like Doraemon with his Time Cloth and zap it till it’s good as new!”

“I would certainly be *capable* of fixing it, yes...but since I happened to have an electric kettle gathering dust at home, it simply felt like the right moment to make the offer,” said Sayumi. “The club room’s electric kettle is old to begin with, so I imagine that replacing it will be preferable to fixing it regardless. My power can return it to a functional state, but it can’t add on new, modern functions.”

“Hmph! A well-reasoned response—just what I’d expect from a girl smart enough to fight it out for the top grades in her year! In deference to your intellect, I’ll let you off the hook just this once.”

“What do you believe gives you the right to act so flagrantly condescending toward me, Andou?”

“*However!* In all seriousness: you could’ve at least used your power to fix the button on my jacket, right?” I continued, holding up my sleeve and showing off its freshly mended cuff. It was so perfectly sewn on you’d think it was brand new...or that she’d used *Route of Origin* to fix it. Her skill with a needle was clearly expert-level. “I’m not saying I have a problem with your work, of course, and I’m really grateful you went to the trouble...but, like, it would’ve been way quicker and easier to just do it with your power, right?”

“W-Well,” Sayumi began, then she fell silent and shifted her gaze awkwardly to the side. Just when I was thinking how rare it was for her to react like that...

“Did you want to show off your housewifeyness, Sayumi?”

...a bleary voice muttered from a totally unexpected direction. Chifuyu had finally woken up, it seemed, and she’d decided to join the conversation as she sat up and rubbed her eyes.

“Ch-Ch-Chifuyu,” Sayumi stammered, “wh-whatever are you talking—”

“Huh? ‘Housewifeyness’? What’s that supposed to mean, Chifuyu?” I asked.

“E-E-Excuse me, Andou!” Sayumi shouted. “Clearly, Chifuyu is still half asleep. Let’s shelve this topic for now and never, ever pick it back—”

“I’m not half asleep,” Chifuyu said, cutting off Sayumi’s inexplicably panicked proposal and taking control of the conversation once more. “Housewifeyness is what makes you a good housewife.”

“Right, okay,” I replied, accepting her logic.

“Housewives have lots and lots of things they have to do. They cook, and clean, and sew, and do laundry, and get complained at by their mother-in-law, and welcome their husbands home, and stuff like that.”

“Yeah, I, uh, think that list got a little weird toward the end there, but I basically get the picture.”

“When girls try to show boys that they can do all those housewife things, they’re showing off their housewifeyness.”

“Ahh, okay, I see now.” *Like how some girls will claim that they’re really good at cooking meat and potato stew just because it’s the stereotypical housewife*

dish. “So, you’re saying that Sayumi decided not to use her power and went out of her way to sew my button on by hand because—” I began, but as I turned around partway through my sentence, I realized that Sayumi was nowhere to be seen.

No sooner had that fact registered than someone grabbed my arm from behind me and twisted it—hard—into a joint lock. It didn’t *hurt*, but I sure as heck couldn’t move an inch either, and I only knew one person who knew the limits of the human body well enough to put a guy into *that* perfect of a submission hold.

“Andou? I would recommend that you never bring this topic up ever again, presuming you’d prefer *not* to have all memory of it beaten out of your skull. Forgetting it voluntarily strikes me as the preferable option by far, frankly,” Sayumi said from behind me. Her voice sounded *incredibly* tense, with an ever so slight tremble to boot...not to mention a clear and present willingness to straight up murder me, if necessary. That said, I was just barely able to glimpse her face when I craned my head around to look over my shoulder, and the way she was blushing made me feel at least a little less imminently doomed.

“I-I mean, why’s that such a big deal? I think people who can sew are awesome, and—”

The pressure on my arm redoubled.

“Agh! O-Okay, point taken! *Point taken!*” I shrieked. That finally convinced her to let my arm go and return to her seat, but given how she kept refusing to so much as look in my direction, the psychological damage she’d sustained must have been pretty substantial. It would’ve been way too awkward to carry that topic forward any further, so with that, Sayumi’s turn came to an end.

“Umm, okay... Seeing as she’s awake and all, Chifuyu can go next,” I said, turning to face our group’s sole elementary schooler, who was currently sitting upright on her impromptu chair-bed.

Himeki Chifuyu: bearer of *World Create*, the power of genesis, capable of creating anything and everything she saw fit. I do mean *anything* too, very literally. She wasn’t limited to creating mere matter, as she could even bring space itself into being with complete impunity. Her power was limitless and all

but omnipotent. And yet...

“Why’d you bother *walking* here today?! You could’ve used one of your usual Gates and been here in a second!”

“I haven’t been exercising lately, so I thought walking would be good for me.”

It was such a profoundly concise, logical explanation that it actually struck me speechless for a second. I couldn’t find a single hole to pick in her story, so I just moved along. “Okay, but what about your bed? Why didn’t you just make one? You usually bring out one of those crazy fancy beds when you nap in the club room, don’t you? You could make a super fluffy mattress, memory foam pillows, the whole shebang...so why’re you napping like a corporate wage slave who’s stuck at the office overnight?”

“Tch tch tch,” Chifuyu said, wagging a finger at me. “You don’t get it, Andou.”

“Wh-What don’t I get?”

“It’s true—I could’ve used *Sweet and Sour Pineapple* to make a bed and pillows and stuff.”

“Hey, no slipping *that* name in all casual-like! It’s *World Create!*” *For crying out loud, how long are we going to keep dragging out that stupid running gag?*

“I can make anything,” Chifuyu said, “so I can make a bed that fits me perfectly and pillows out of comfy fabrics. I can make the lighting all nice, and music too. I’ve tried lots of things. I’ve done my research.”

“No kidding. You really don’t cut corners when it comes to napping, huh?”

“And one day...I did it. I finally made a bed fit for a god.”

“Fit for a *god*?!”

“Right. But then I realized that, really...it might’ve been a devil’s bed instead,” Chifuyu said, a shudder running through her voice. She sounded like a remorseful scientist telling the tale of the weapon of mass destruction she’d inadvertently invented. “A bed made by me, for me. It fit me perfectly in every way, and it felt super amazing to sleep in... It was like the bed and my body were one.”

“You’ve been getting up to some pretty crazy stuff while we weren’t around,

huh...? But wait—if you came up with a bed that perfect, why didn't you just make it here?"

"I slept in the gods' bed over and over...but eventually I realized. Something was wrong."

"Wrong how?"

"The gods' bed was perfect for me. I was satisfied. But...it was wrong. Something about it wasn't right. I wasn't taking the sort of naps I used to anymore," Chifuyu said. I didn't really get it, but she'd segued into some sort of speech, and I wasn't about to interrupt. "I'd always liked searching for the comfiest way to sleep in beds that weren't quite right. Realizing that I'd ended up in a weird pose was fun. I loved losing my blanket, finding it again, and wrapping myself up in it..."

As Chifuyu's explanation dragged on, her words grew gradually more and more zealous in tone. Her eyes were wide open, and a profound sense of distress lurked deep within her gaze. In other words, no matter how easy it would've been to riff on her story, I just *couldn't*.

"Perfection...is hollow. Real, total satisfaction...is empty. The gods' bed...took away everything that made sleeping fun for me."

I sorta just...stood there. *Okay, for real though, why's this so intense? Why's an elementary schooler acting like a world-famous actress who ended up becoming so successful that she lost all sense of happiness and wound up living a life of unfulfilled anguish?*

"So, I've decided not to use the gods' bed anymore. I've been into napping in places that are a little hard to sleep in lately."

"Well, it...sounds like you've been through one hell of an internal conflict, I guess. But still, isn't sleeping on folding chairs a little *too* uncomfortable?"

"It's fine," Chifuyu said with a satisfied nod. "When I sleep in a bed that's too narrow, and which pokes me whenever I move...it feels kinda nice and thrilling..."

"*Okay, this is getting weird in a hurry!*"

Chifuyu had taken her hobby into a very deep, very personally philosophical sort of place, and her attempt to explain it sailed way over my head. Then again, it was probably a mistake to try to understand Chifuyu, the reigning queen of whimsy, in the first place. Himeki Chifuyu was a real-life cryptid who defied control and description. She'd clearly come to us from some entirely unknowable, otherworldly realm.

"Phew! Well, I guess that's everyone," I said.

"Oh, *no* you don't! You'd better not think you're *finished* yet," Tomoyo chimed in a beat later. It seemed she'd finally pulled herself out of her depression pit, and she was now glaring at me. "You've had your fun raking us over the coals, but now it's *your* turn! You talk a pretty big game for a guy who hasn't been using *his* power at all lately either!"

"Ugh!" I grunted. She hit me right where it hurt with that one, and now that she'd pointed it out, it looked like the other members were all starting to realize that she was right.

"Admit it: you've been forgetting about your power just like we have, haven't you?" said Tomoyo.

"N-Nuh-uh! I haven't been *forgetting* it at all! I just... Look, there's a really good reason for this, okay? My power, despite how amazing it is, falls short on a certain criterion..."

"A what now?"

I gulped. "I couldn't believe it myself, at first. I always knew that *Dark and Dark* was the mightiest, most fearsome, most sinister, most *terrible* power in existence. I'd believed it to be flawless and unparalleled. Never did I imagine it could have such a glaring defect..."

"I'm kinda curious what part of it *isn't* defective," Tomoyo commented.

"Yes, indeed—a truly dreadful criterion, by which *Dark and Dark* had to be judged," I continued. "A criterion that could not be ignored. A criterion that rises above all others..."

"How many times do you have to say 'criterion' before you're satisfied?!"

I mean, a bunch! Obviously! “Criterion” was just such a great word! It means a standard by which you can judge something, to put it simply. It’s also the singular form of “criteria,” but somehow it feels *way* more stylish than its plural counterpart! It’s the sort of word that gives you the irresistible urge to casually drop it into conversations whenever you can! *The word “criterion”: hella cool!*

“Now then, Tomoyo: explain to me what my power, *Dark and Dark*, is capable of,” I prompted.

“I mean, it lets you make black flames?” Tomoyo answered half-heartedly. “They’re kinda lukewarm, at most. Like, about as hot as a hot water bottle.”

“Mwa ha ha... It’d be in your best interest to not underestimate my power. I’ve trained with constant, unerring discipline, and thanks to those efforts...I’ve managed to raise the heat of my flame from that of a hot water bottle that’s been filled thirty minutes ago to that of a hot water bottle that’s been filled mere *moments* ago!”

“Which is *still* a freaking hot water bottle!”

“But, well, I digress. Next, go ahead and tell me what season it is right now.”

“The season? I mean...we’re pretty much right between summer and fall, I guess?”

“Precisely. At this very moment, we stand upon the precipice that separates those two seasons!” It had *also* been unseasonably warm for that time of year. Summer’s latent heat had stuck around way longer than usual, and even though summer vacation was over and August was on its way out as well, it was still warm enough to make me wish we had an air conditioner in the club room. “I trust you see now where I’m going with this? You understand what the consequences of invoking *Dark and Dark* at this time of year would be?”

“No. Not even a little.”

Clearly, I wasn’t getting through to her. That meant that I had no choice. I had to steel my resolve and reveal the ever-distressing truth—the one unexpected criterion that my beloved power did not, in fact, satisfy.

“When I use *Dark and Dark* at this time of year...it feels *really* muggy.”

“Oh my *god* that’s petty!” Tomoyo shouted, but to *me*, it was anything but. No, it was a matter of life and death.

Normally, *Dark and Dark* was so persistently, frustratingly lukewarm that I found myself screaming at it to just *Heat up already!* with all the passion of former tennis player turned motivational speaker Matsuoka Shuzou. Now, though, that very heat had turned into a fatal flaw. I mean, seriously, it was *already* so friggin’ hot out! Who the heck would go bringing out supernatural flames in weather like *that*?!

“In weather like this, the tepid heat of *Dark and Dark*...is just about as unpleasant as a sensation could possibly get,” I concluded.

“Yeah,” Tomoyo sighed. “Your power’s fire definitely hits that ‘ugh, nasty’ level of heat, doesn’t it?”

“Ever since my power awakened, when I woke up every morning, I’d say, ‘Good morning, *Dark and Dark*,’ and every night before bed, I’d say, ‘Sleep tight, *Dark and Dark*’...but lately, using it before bed’s been making me too hot to actually sleep, and I finally brought an end to that routine...”

“Good! You should’ve stopped that *ages* ago!”

“Maaan, winter was so nice in comparison! My dark flames heated my comforter from the inside, so I was always nice and toasty when I went to sleep.”

“You’re *literally* just using it like a hot water bottle!”

“And the fact that it burns black just makes it all the worse, honestly. It makes me feel hot just *looking* at it! And, like, what’s up with the whole black flame thing in the first place? Why *black*, of all colors? It makes no sense!”

“Holy crap, did you really just say that out loud? Isn’t that, like, a betrayal of your *whole* persona?! Your chuuni level’s dropping by the second!”

Oh, whoops! That was a close one. I almost lost sight of my own identity! To think the heat could be unpleasant enough to drive me to such an extreme... The lukewarm flames of Dark and Dark are truly a power to be feared!

“So, yeah, that’s about the size of it,” I said. “The only thing using *Dark and Dark* at this time of year accomplishes is making me get more and more fed up with my own power, so I’ve made a conscious decision to seal it away for the time being.”

“You’re making it sound like you and your power are a couple who still love each other but decided to break up for each other’s sake, and it’s *really* weird,” Tomoyo grumbled.

With that, I’d finished clearing the air about the complex and conflicted feelings I’d been grappling with lately, and I once again turned to face the other members of my club. “I’ve been suppressing the deep, *burning* desire to use my power this whole time! I’ve been suffering through a living hell...but what about *you* guys?! You all can use *your* powers just fine no matter *how* hot out it is, so why aren’t you?!”

“Huh? What does you not using *your* power have to do with us?” asked Hatoko, looking a little bewildered.

“Nothing,” said Sayumi. “He’s simply lashing out. And baselessly at that.”

“You’re a pain, Andou,” said Chifuyu, driving the point home.

Damnations! I should’ve known that none of them would understand the agony I’ve been going through... Or so I’d thought, until Sayumi let out a sigh.

“Yes, I understand,” she said with an exasperated nod. “And that being the case, I propose that we dedicate the remainder of today to using all of our powers to our hearts’ content.”

“S-Seriously?!” I gasped.

“It *is* true that we haven’t been using them whatsoever recently, after all,” Sayumi conceded.

“Right?! We totally haven’t! Not even a little!”

“We used to make a point of checking in on our supernatural powers once a month, without fail, but thanks to summer vacation, it’s been nearly *two* months since our last session,” Sayumi continued. “It seems like using them once more and taking careful note of how they’ve developed, if at all, would be

worthwhile. I trust you all agree?”

The rest of our members quickly acquiesced to our president’s absolutely spectacular suggestion. It had only been about two months since our last supernatural power checkup, yet somehow, it *felt* like it’d been way longer than that—long enough that I’d almost forgotten we did those checkups at all, in fact.

“Well then,” said Sayumi, “let’s begin by deciding the manner and order in which we’ll be conducting our tests.”

“Ooh, ooh!” Hatoko shouted as she waved her hand in the air.

“Yes, Hatoko?”

“Why don’t we use our powers however Juu wants us to?”

I gaped at her. “Wh-What’re you talking about?” I asked.

“Well, you were upset about how we were acting during our club today, weren’t you?” Hatoko replied.

“Yeah. Well, kinda? I wasn’t *upset*, really—I just wished you would’ve all used your powers a little, that’s all.”

“So then, you can teach me what I should do, and I’ll just do that! And then you can tell me whether or not the stuff I did satisfied you! Okay?”

They’ll do everything I tell them to? Everything I want them to do? I’ll have four girls with god-tier supernatural powers at my beck and call?

“Hmm... I mean, I guess that’d work,” said Tomoyo. “I mean, if Andou’s the one deciding everything that happens, he can’t exactly complain to us about this sort of crap anymore, which sounds nice.”

“A fair point,” Sayumi agreed. “Moreover, I must admit that I’m somewhat curious as to how he’ll ask us to use our powers.”

“I’m okay with it too. I’ll do it, Andou,” said Chifuyu. Even our club’s resident princess had deigned to go along with Hatoko’s plan.

Wh-What the heck is even happening...? Where is this windfall of good luck coming from?! How did we go from me griping at them to an incredible

development like this?!

“Mwa ha ha... Mwaaa ha ha ha ha!” I cackled. “Very well, then! If you wish for my guidance, then I shall be more than happy to provide it! Allow me to teach you the *true* way you all should be using your powers!”

About an hour later, my intensive crash course came to an end. Then we rewound the clock and reset our timeline to the state it was in *before* our club activities began for the day. This time, we would live the way high schoolers with supernatural powers *should* live. We would embody the ideal form of our literary club as I saw it!

“A troubled wind blows today,” I muttered to myself as I made my way down the hall toward the club room, exuding an aura of danger with every step I took.

By the time I reached our room, slid the door open, and stepped inside, my four steadfast companions had already assembled. Each and every one of them wore a dauntless smile on her face, and each and every one of them sat with such dignified, imposing posture, one would think they were *all* the leader of our group.

“Well now, what do we have here? It’s not every day that *you* decide to pay us a visit,” Tomoyo said with a smirk as she met my gaze. “What fit of whimsy led a slacker like *you* to bother showing up?”

“Heh!” I chuckled. “I was just worried that you four wouldn’t be able to handle *it* on your own, that’s all.”

“You’re getting soft, Guiltia Sin Jurai.”

“Never speak that name again,” I said. “I gave it up a long time ago. Now I’m just Andou Jurai—nothing more, and nothing less.”

“(Seriously? He spends *ages* doing everything he can to get us to call him that, and then when I finally do, he gives me *this* crap?)”

“(It’s so hard to tell *what* he wants us to call him, isn’t it?)”

Tomoyo and Hatoko broke character and started whispering to each other, but I just ignored them. I took a seat and glanced over at Sayumi, who returned

my gaze with a smile and began to speak.

“This is nothing short of stunning,” she said. “How long has it been since all five of us gathered together in the same room?”

“Not since yester—” Chifuyu began, but I clapped a hand over her mouth before she could finish.

Come on, Chifuyu, this is just getting good!

“I think it’s high time you told us what’s going on, Sayumi. What made you decide to bring the five of us together again? What the hell could’ve driven you to call *me* back to the round table?” I asked, a note of self-deprecation dripping into my tone. The table in our club room was very much rectangular, by the way, but in my mind’s eye, it was as round as could be. *Round tables: hella cool.*

“He he he! No need to be so hasty, Andou. You’ll have your answers in due time...and speaking of which, I do believe it’s time for us to begin our meeting,” Sayumi began—only to be immediately interrupted!

“Ugh! *Aaauuuggghhhhhh!*” I screamed as, without warning, I doubled over and clutched at my right arm! “*Dammit!* Be still, *Dark and Dark...!* These people are not your enemies! Listen to me, curse you... *Obey me!*”

The destructive impulses welling up from deep within threatened to overwhelm me, but I held them back, struggling with all my might... And then!

“Ugh! Agggh!” Tomoyo cried out in anguish, her body stiffening up in an instant! “Wh-What’s...happening...?! I can’t...move! My time’s...stopping! Could it be...? Are the gods of time finally taking vengeance on me for desecrating their realm?!”

Tomoyo was trapped, forced to pay the price for the taboo she had violated... But then!

“Ugh! Oh nooo!” Hatoko shouted without warning! I...would’ve preferred for her to sound a little more agonized and a little less plain old startled, but I guess it was close enough. “Wh-What’s going ooon? Oh, it hurts, it hurts sooo much! My body’s being ravaged by, umm...err...*Oven Energy!* *Oven Energy’s* tearing me to pieces, oh nooo!”

Please...at least go with Oven Element, I'm begging you!

And then!

"Ugh! Ahhhhhh!" Sayumi wailed as she clutched desperately at her face!
"Route of Origin...it's gone berserk! I cannot control it! My body is returning...to the way it's meant to be...! The rough patches of my skin, my acne, my tan lines—they're all being purged! Even my hair is being repaired, restored down to its cuticles! I have to stop it, or I'll end up looking so youthful, I'll be mistaken for an elementary schooler!"

Well, that sure is a convenient way for a power to go berserk! And actually, wait...is it just me, or did she kinda just let the fact that she wants to have more of a baby face slip out? It's not like she looks super old, or anything! She's just a little adultlike, that's all!

Then!

"Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" Chifuyu grunted out of the blue! It would've been nice if she'd stuck to just one "ugh," but Chifuyu was apparently feeling a little eager to please. "My Sweet and Sour Pineapple...is going away... I-It's turning into...Swee...Swee...Sweet and Sour Beef..."

Yeah. Okay. Should've expected this to devolve into chaos.

"Ugh... E-Everyone," I choked out. I clutched my right arm, and at the same time I reached out with it, as if to crawl my way toward them...but I couldn't really make it convincing from my current position, so I got up out of my chair, took a few steps away, doubled over on the floor, *then* reached out once more. It was no use, though—even as I stretched my hand out to them, my trusted companions fell one by one.

"No... How did it come to this...? Is *this* the price we must pay for misusing our powers...? Ugah!" I grunted as I coughed out a mouthful of fresh blood...or at least coughed convincingly enough that you'd *think* that was what I was doing. "Dammit... Where did we...go...wrong...?"

As the strength drained away from me, my hand fell to the floor...and gradually, darkness engulfed the world.

BAD END

“What the *hell* was *that* supposed to be?!” Tomoyo bellowed, blasting straight through the indescribable sense of satisfaction I’d been basking in with the fury of a raging inferno. “There is so, *so* much wrong with this picture I *literally* don’t even know where to start! What the *actual* hell?! How did that have *anything* to do with us using our powers in the right way?!”

“Great power comes at a proportionally great cost,” I explained. “I was trying to show how important it is for us to keep that fact constantly in mind, that’s all.”

For a second, Tomoyo just stared at me. “Wait,” she finally said. “We didn’t even *use* our powers at all, in the end.”

I had to admit, that *had* been a bit of an oversight in my plan. By the time I’d realized it, though, it’d already been too late to call the whole thing off.

“Why did *everyone* do the same stupid grunt?” Tomoyo continued. “And I can deal with our powers going haywire, but why would they all do it at the exact same time? Is *everyone* in our group totally useless? This whole thing was just all of us self-destructing!”

“Well, yeah. Any character with a super overpowered, cheat-tier ability’s doomed to self-destruct in the end. It’s a given,” I said.

“And everyone just *dies* at the end? What sort of overblown tragedy of an ending is *that*?”

“Oh, the ‘everyone dies’ ending’s just one possible outcome. The anime, manga, novels, and song series all have different endings. It’s a whole mixed-media thing.”

“I’m sorry, I missed the part where we became a *Kagerou Project* spin-off!”

Sayumi let out a sigh. “I suppose it was a mistake to leave the planning in Andou’s hands after all. This has been a complete and utter waste of our time.”

“It sure was,” said Hatoko. “Oh, and good work, Chifuyu! You really sold your part!”

“It was fun. I might like acting. *Ugh! Ugh!*” Chifuyu grunted. She seemed to find the whole thing hilarious, and although I was a *little* tempted to rebuff the

part where she called it an act, I decided against it. If she'd had fun, then that was what really mattered.

With that, my crash course on the proper way for us to use our supernatural powers came to a close. It had been ages since we'd gotten to talk that much about our abilities, and I was feeling pretty fulfilled. Just as I was reflecting on how fun the exercise was, though...

"Excuse me," a polite but somewhat gruff voice rang out as our door slid open. "I can see you're all enjoying yourselves to the fullest, as always," said the president of our school's student council as she stepped inside. Whether she meant that frankly or sarcastically was anyone's guess.

"Kudou!" I said. "Been a while, huh?"

Kudou Mirei was not a member of our literary club, but she *was* our peer in a different manner: she, too, had awakened to a supernatural power of her own. She was the bearer of *Grateful Robber*, the great and mighty power to pilfer whatever power she happened to witness in use...and, yes, it turns out that the English word "grateful" *doesn't* have anything to do with "great" in the way I'd been trying to use it at all, but let's just not linger on that little detail and move right along.

"It has, yes," Kudou replied. "And to the rest of you as well," she added, glancing at the other members.

"Did you need something from us? And does it, you know...have something to do with our powers?" I asked. My mind had immediately leaped to that assumption the second she showed up at our door, but I was surprised to see her shake her head.

"No, not at all," Kudou said, then she turned to address our club as a whole. "I'm here to consult with the literary club about the cultural festival."

That's when I remembered: our school's annual cultural festival was, in fact, just one month away.

Scene 2. Much Ado about Fantasy

“Well then, let’s begin brainstorming ideas for what we can do for this year’s cultural festival.”

A day had passed by, and we were once again gathered up in the literary club’s room. Sayumi, our president, stood at the head of the table to lead the discussion. Almost everyone else was sitting down—I had lost at rock paper scissors, so I was standing by the whiteboard, ready to take notes on all the ideas that were proposed.

“As Miss Kudou so kindly explained to us yesterday, we of the literary club will have free rein over the music room on the fifth floor on the day of the festival,” Sayumi continued.

To sum up the news that Kudou had delivered: normally, the school’s brass band club would use the music room in question during the cultural festival. This year, however, they would be participating in a competition on the very same day, and even the members who wouldn’t be playing in the competition would be attending to cheer their clubmates on. That left the music room up for grabs, and somewhere along the way, somebody proposed that the literary club could figure out something to do with it.

Our school’s music room was about twice the size of the standard classrooms. One would think it’d be the sort of space that students fight tooth and nail to occupy for the festival, considering how many different groups need plenty of space to put on displays and performances...but the issue was complicated by the fact that the music room was an oddly difficult space to use effectively, even in spite of its size.

I mean, it was *big*, but not *big enough* for a band to perform in, or to run a beauty contest in, or whatever. It was also tiered, with steps gradually raising the floor level upward as you moved toward the back of the room, which meant that pushing desks together to make tables and sell food wasn’t really an option. All those inconveniences resulted in nobody specifically requesting to

use the room, and that's how it ended up getting handed to us.

"We're not being compelled to use the room, so naturally, turning the offer down is an option," said Sayumi. "However, considering we've been handed such a golden opportunity, I believe it would be a shame to not make the most of it. Is everyone all right with utilizing the room?"

The rest of us quickly consented to our president's proposal. The literary club, well...to be brutally honest, we'd never really *done* much in particular. The better part of our meetings was spent just chatting with each other, and it was only very rarely that we engaged in any of the activities of a proper literary club. We'd never been particularly motivated when it came to the cultural festivals either—the previous year, we'd put out a literary magazine, and that was it.

Why, then, were we now willing to put some real teen spirit into doing something big for the festival? The answer was as simple as could be.

"Basically, the fact that they're proposing this at all means that in their eyes, we're a buncha slackers with nothing better to do," I said. "Yeah, we can't exactly take *that* lying down, can we?"

"I...suppose that's more or less accurate, yes," said Sayumi, her expression distinctly pained.

Kudou had done her best to not *explicitly* frame it in those terms, but her whole speech has practically exuded an aura of "You don't have anything else to do, right?" Considering the state of our day-to-day activities, I couldn't really blame her for seeing us in that light...but that didn't make the fact that she saw us that way rankle any less, somehow. It was just one of those things.

"I propose that we begin by voicing as many ideas as we can muster, then narrow them down to the most practical or appealing options," said Sayumi.

Tomoyo ended up speaking first. "I mean, there's nothing stopping us from just making a literary magazine like last year and putting it on display in the music room, is there?" she asked.

"True," said Sayumi, "but if at all possible, I would rather avoid doing so. We can file that as our last resort."

Yeah, fair enough. We'd been handed the chance to use the music room on a

silver platter, and setting up a bunch of magazines in there would've felt like a boring waste of potential. It *was* a valid proposal, though, so I figured that, as the meeting's secretary, I should note it down on the whiteboard. I uncapped my pen, wrote "Unveil the accursed grimoire of King Solomon" as the first item on our list of options...and was immediately and unilaterally stripped of my position as recordkeeper. Sayumi shot me a scathing glare, twirled a finger in the air, and just like that, I was out.

"But *why*, dang it all...? Should I have called it the *Lemegeton* instead of a grimoire? Is *that* where I went wrong? Or maybe I should've ditched the Solomon theme and gone with a book from the Cthulhu Mythos? Like the *Book of Eibon*, or the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*...?"

"Okay, we get the picture. Move along, chuuni boy," Tomoyo said as she took my place at the whiteboard and scrawled out a perfectly uninspired "Literary magazine exhibit" on our list of proposals.

Now that I'd been released from my secretarial duties, I took a moment to try to come up with an idea of my own. "We're working with the music room, huh...? I guess the normal thing to do would be some sorta musical performance? Like, we could do a chorus sorta deal, or even play instruments," I eventually proposed. Holding a full-on band-style concert would be impossible in terms of both equipment and scale, but I figured that a smaller recital would be doable enough.

"Singing's one thing, but instruments...?" Tomoyo said with a raised eyebrow. "You're making this sound like it'd be a piece of cake, but can you even play anything to begin with?"

"Mwa ha ha! I see the state of your memory is grim, Tomoyo—or should I say, *grimoire*?"

"That makes *literally* no sense!"

"Surely you haven't forgotten that I've already introduced you to my soulbound partner in crime? That is to say...*Infinity Maria*?!"

For a moment, Tomoyo stared blankly at me. "Oooh," she finally said, "right, that *did* happen. You brought a guitar you couldn't even play to school with you."

“Indeed, it feels like it’s been an age since that fateful day... The day you stole the title of Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel away from me. It was a storied name, passed down through the generations at the cost of the lives of all its previous bearers, but alas, I could lay claim to it no longer...”

“Since when did that title have that grim of a backstory?! It’s a *name*, not some ultimate old school martial arts maneuver! And also, I did *not* steal it! *You* forced it on me!”

“But such a petty setback was nowhere near enough to break the bond between me and *Maria*! No, we’ve stayed together, shedding blood, sweat, and tears as we’ve expended every ounce of effort we could working toward a shared goal...”

“Oh, huh. You mean you can actually *play* that Mustang of yours these days? You couldn’t even tune the thing, last I heard.”

“Heh heh heh!” I chuckled. “I suppose that *would* be the natural conclusion, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, color me surprised. Good for you,” said Tomoyo. She sounded genuinely impressed, and the look of respect she gave me felt *incredible*, even if it was so slight it was barely perceptible. People just started looking at you like that when you could play an instrument, it seemed, and the sensation was powerfully appealing. I didn’t have all that long to bask in it before it all came crashing down, though.

“Huh? But wait, Juu,” Hatoko interjected. “I thought you said that you haven’t been playing your guitar at all lately, so you sold it back to mmphmnhph?”

I tried to cover her mouth before she ran it in an unfortunate direction, but tragically, I was just a little too late. The damage was done, and the look Tomoyo was giving me *now* was anything but respectful.

“There’s *nothing* worse than a guy who’ll lie to your face like it’s nothing,” Tomoyo said, her voice dripping with contempt.

“I-I wasn’t really *lying*,” I said. “I *did* put in a ton of effort, and I really could play it, just a little...” There’s no single clear, specific standard that you have to achieve in order to be able to claim that you can play the guitar, so *technically*, I

hadn't lied at all...though I was also perfectly aware of how pathetic of an excuse that was.

"Why would you *pawn* your soulbound partner in crime?" Tomoyo pressed.

"No, it wasn't like *that*, honest," I said. "I mean, you don't have to put it that way! That makes it sound so much worse than it was! It's *because* our souls are bound, really. Sometimes, you just need some time away from the people you're closest to, right? They say that if you really love someone, you should let them go—it's like, y'know, the same sorta mindset that got Ash to give up his Charizard, I guess..."

Of course, if I were being blunt, I'd have said that I just got bored with it. I'd sold it right back to the thrift store I'd bought it from in the first place. I'd barely used it at all, and it was still in just as good of a condition as it had been when I'd bought it, so I got a really good price for it too...

"Of course, I *just* sold the actual guitar. I still have the case, so no worries there!"

"Why would you *possibly* need a guitar case if you don't have a guitar?!" Tomoyo snapped.

"Cause it means I can still walk around town with it slung over my shoulder every once in a while, duh."

"You've been walking around with an empty guitar case?! Oh my god, *stop*, you're seriously gonna make me cringe myself to death! Showing off the fact that you're a musician when you *aren't* is the most pathetically desperate thing I've ever heard!"

Oh, come on! It's so much fun! Walking around town with the case slung across my back and stopping out of nowhere every once in a while to pretend to jot down ideas for lyrics in a notepad was a blast, no two ways about it. *Coming up with lyrics in a fit of sudden inspiration: hella cool!*

"Speaking of Andou feigning musical talent," Sayumi said as if she'd just remembered something, "I've always found the way you make a point of showing off the pick you carry around in your pencil case each and every time you open it to be profoundly irritating."

“Ugh!” I grunted.

“I was under the impression that you really *were* keeping up with your guitar practice, and I refrained from commenting out of respect for your efforts. I never would have believed that you were *actually* walking around with a pick on hand in spite of the fact that you don’t even play the guitar at all.”

“I-It’s not like I was going out of my way to keep it around! It just sorta ended up in there, and I, umm, well...”

“Then there’s the matter of the occasional moments when you close your eyes, smirk, and start playing air guitar. If I may be frank, those were rather difficult to watch. The spectacle was simply so tragic, I couldn’t even bring myself to laugh about it.”

“Th-That was me playing a melody I came up with in a moment of inspiration to make sure I didn’t forget it, that’s all...”

“Watching you look so insufferably smug as you strummed away to your imagined rhythm, not even realizing that your chords and fingering were nonsensical at best... Words would fail to describe how intensely pitiable you looked. I cannot stress this enough: if your skill with the guitar is so abysmal that anyone can tell at a glance you’re making it up as you go, then you should not—under *any* circumstances—make a show of pretending to play in public.”

“...”

“Oh, and you should know that according to your homeroom teacher, Miss Satomi, the girls in your class consider your little performances discomforting and obnoxious.”

“Wait, the girls think I’m a nuisance now?!”

N-No way! It wasn’t supposed to be like this... This isn’t what I wanted at all! The whole *point* of me casually flashing my pick and taking every chance at lunchtime or after school to lounge on a window frame and strum away at an invisible guitar was to make everyone think, “Oh, is Andou a guitarist? That’s kinda cool, isn’t it?” Now, however, I’d been struck by a revelation so unexpected, so profoundly humiliating, that all I could do was collapse to the floor and writhe in shame.

Tomoyo shot me a fed up glance. “You know, if you spent less time posing with your stupid props and more time actually *practicing*, you’d probably be able to play the guitar by now.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Tomoyo,” I said. “This has never been about me wanting to play the guitar. It’s about me wanting everyone to see me as a guy who can play the guitar!”

“Well, at least you’re friggin’ honest about it!”

So, yeah—I’d proposed the idea of putting on a musical performance in spite of the fact that I didn’t actually have any skills in the area to speak of. Not just in terms of instruments either—the best I could say about my singing ability was that I went to karaoke every once in a while.

“I mean, I’ll put it on the board, I guess...but I really don’t think these are realistic at all,” Tomoyo said as she jotted “Chorus” and “Concert” onto the whiteboard. “I can’t play anything either, and I don’t think I’m up to learning an instrument in the next month. Oh, but now that I think about it—didn’t you say you took piano lessons, Hatoko?”

“I *did*,” said Hatoko, “but that was when I was in elementary school! I haven’t played at all lately, so I think I’ve probably forgotten how. What about you, Sayumi?”

“I’ve taken piano lessons as well, and I imagine that I could play a simple song competently enough. My grandmother taught me the basics of the koto and the shamisen as well,” Sayumi said. She was downplaying her ability with the instruments, but I knew very well that if she said she knew “the basics” of something, it probably meant that she was outlandishly good at it.

“How about you, Chifuyu? Play any instruments?” I asked.

“I play a little piano too,” said Chifuyu.

“Oh, huh! I didn’t know that.”

“Cookie goes to a piano school, and I took a lesson once. It was about an hour long.”

“Okay, so you really *weren’t* kidding about the ‘a little’ part!”

“They taught me a song called 4’33”.”

“So *that’s* where you picked that up!”

That title took me right back to Maestro Chifuyu’s ultra-*ultra*-avant-garde impressionist painting, *The Air*...which one could also describe as a blank sheet of paper. She’d submitted it as her summer homework assignment for art class the year before, supposedly, and according to Kuki, she’d used the existence of 4’33” as an example to argue that her “painting” was a valid piece of artwork.

That being said...I had to imagine that there was *quite* the story behind a kid showing up at a music school and being taught a piece so unusual it involved playing precisely no music whatsoever. *What on earth did you do, Chifuyu? What sort of behavior could’ve made your teacher throw up their hands and say, “Okay, Chifuyu, try playing 4’33” next! It’s a real song, I promise!”*

“4’33” is my signature piece,” Chifuyu declared proudly. Considering that Miss Satomi told me that Chifuyu had taken a bunch of lessons overtime but had never kept any of them up for long, I had to assume that she couldn’t *really* play any instruments at all—or at least not well.

“Hmm. So the only real musicians here are me, Hatoko, and Sayumi,” I said thoughtfully. “Yeah, you’re right. This might not be very realistic after all.”

“You didn’t really think you could casually slip yourself into the musician column without anyone calling you out, did you?” Tomoyo jabbed. I, however, was already moving on to try to find our next idea!

“What about you, Chifuyu? Is there anything you want to do for the festival?” I asked.

“Hmm. I wanna do something fun,” said Chifuyu.

“Not exactly specific, huh...? That’s true enough, though. Whatever we do, it’s gonna be fun.”

“Hmm...” Chifuyu muttered. She spent a moment stroking Squirrely’s head and tugging his tail as she mulled the question over, then she mumbled out a proper idea. “In that case, I wanna try comedy.”

“Comedy? Like a manzai act, or stand-up, or something?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. Yeah, that makes sense, actually. Nothing says ‘fun’ quite like comedy, and all.”

“Yeah,” Chifuyu agreed with a nod. “It sounds fun, and easy too. The comedians on TV just run around and act stupid, and everyone laughs—”

It was instant. No sooner had the words left Chifuyu’s mouth than the gargantuan hand of a monstrous demon came crashing down upon her head, locking her in its inescapable grip.

...Wait, no, scratch that. I’m not sure *where* that overpoweringly sinister, demonic image came from, but it was actually *Hatoko* who’d grabbed onto Chifuyu’s head. And really, it was less of a grab and more of a gentle pat.

“Chifuyu?” said Hatoko with a flawlessly amiable smile. “You shouldn’t say that sort of thing, okay?”

“Huh? But—”

“You shouldn’t say that sort of thing, okay?”

“...Y-Yes, ma’am.”

The kindness of Hatoko’s expression was worthy of that of a veteran kindergarten teacher, but the sheer, irresistible intensity behind it? *That* could only be described as dreadful. Chifuyu shrank back so immediately, you’d think she’d been stared down by a mythical monster straight out of a particularly ghastly fairy tale.

“H-Hey, Andou...? What was *that* all about? Since when was *Hatoko* that scary? And I’ve *never* heard Chifuyu talk that politely to *anyone* before,” Tomoyo whispered into my ear. Judging by the look on her face, she was really freaked out.

“Yeah, uh... Chifuyu kinda touched a nerve, I guess. You might say this subject’s taboo, as far as Hatoko’s concerned,” I explained.

Hatoko adored comedy in all forms, and making light of comedians or their industry was a surefire way to set her off. To put it bluntly, she’d *flip* at the slightest provocation. Hatoko’s freak-outs didn’t involve any enraged tirades or

anything like that, though. Her anger was quieter—less *aggressive* than that. She'd just stand there, smiling away as she told you off...and *that* was scarier than any amount of shouting could have ever been. If she were a manga character, there was no doubt in my mind that her flipping out would be accompanied with a “RUUUUUUMBLE” sound effect looming in the background.

“Back in elementary school, I said something along the lines of ‘Maybe I’ll be a comedian when I grow up! I mean, they get to make money and go on TV just for acting stupid—how easy’s that?’ in front of Hatoko...”

“Ahh, yeah. That sure sounds like something an elementary schooler would say,” said Tomoyo. “So, what’d she do?”

“Well, she...she... Huh? What *did* she do?” *Huh. That’s weird... It’s almost like that’s a chunk of my memory that’s just...missing...?* “Haah...haah...haah... H-Huh, weird... For some reason, I can barely breathe... K-Kinda starting to tremble a little too...”

“H-Holy crap, what’s wrong, Andou?! You’re sweating like crazy!”

“I-I... I can’t remember. I have no idea what Hatoko did to me... C-Could it be? Is my own psyche blocking the memory of ‘that moment’ away? Are my instincts rejecting it?”

“It was *scare quotes*-worthy?! You know you can only get away with putting those around something like ‘that moment’ if it’s foreshadowing something *really* major, right?!”

“I-It’s no use... All I can remember are scattered fragments... A few isolated images, at most... I remember...a crayfish, an incredibly hot bowl of oden, and a bath filled with boiling-hot water...”

“Aren’t those all things they use to torture comedians for laughs on variety shows?!”

“But even though I made such a huge deal about how hot the oden was, when I actually ate it, it was cool enough that it didn’t burn me at all...and the boiling-hot bathwater didn’t end up being all that hot in the end either...”

“Cut that out! The comedians on TV do all that stuff for real! It’s definitely not

staged!”

By the time I managed to seal my forbidden memories away and quell the overpowering terror that’d threatened to overwhelm me, Hatoko had let Chifuyu go. We *did* put “Comedy” on the list, just for the sake of completeness, but realistically speaking, I knew it wasn’t happening. Hatoko would *never* allow us to put on a comedy performance that was anything less than professional in quality...though as soon as that thought crossed my mind, I realized something.

“Wait a sec, Hatoko. Couldn’t *you* write the script for a manzai sketch or a stand-up routine?” I suggested.

“Hmm...” Hatoko paused to think. “No, probably not. I love comedy, but that doesn’t mean I can write it myself!”

That answered that question pretty definitively. She had no interest whatsoever in making her own material. Hatoko was all about consuming comedy, not producing it herself.

“Huh...? But wait—didn’t you used to have a notebook that you carried around so you could write down any jokes you came up with? Like, toward the end of elementary school?” I mentioned as another old memory came back to me.

A look of shock came across Hatoko’s face, and she stiffened up. Her eyes were wide, and her gaze shifted wildly from one end of the room to the other. “Huh? U-Uhh, umm, err... D-Did I? I don’t remember at all!”

“Yeah, you totally did! I think you titled it ‘Hatoko’s Super Sidesplitters,’ or something like that. Sorta feels like you were setting the bar pretty high for yourself, now that I think about it.”

Hatoko let out a strangled gasp.

“Yeah, and you asked me to read your material one time. I’m pretty sure I remember all the jokes you wrote being blatant rip-offs of popular comedians’ material, actually...”

“A-Ah, ah, *aaahhhhhh*! Stop it, stop it! Cut it *out*, Juu, you jerk! Just forget about that, pleeease!” Hatoko wailed, her face bright red and tears pooling in her eyes as she lightly battered me with her fists.

It seemed that, in Hatoko's mind, her old attempts at writing comedy were an unfortunate stain in her personal history. To be fair, I think pretty much everyone has a notebook buried away somewhere that they never, *ever* want anyone else to see, or at least some equivalent thereof. My *Bloody Bible*, for instance...was, uh, *totally* different! Not the same thing at all! It was a tome of ultimate truth that detailed the world's most secret principles! *That's* the only reason I didn't want to show it to anyone!

"So, anyway, do you have any ideas, Hatoko?" I said when she finally got tired of hitting me. She had yet to contribute any ideas of her own, after all.

"Hmm. Let me think," Hatoko said, then crossed her arms and spent a few seconds pondering with a very thoughtful look on her face. "Oh, I know!" she finally said, her expression lighting up again. "Why don't we do an act?"

"An act...? Like, a play?" I asked.

"Yeah! You know, like what you had us do yesterday, where we all acted like our powers were going out of control? I thought everyone did a pretty good job at that, so I figured it might be fun to do something like that for the festival!"

"We've been over this! That wasn't an act! But, anyway...did *that* seriously look like everyone doing 'a pretty good job' to you?" I muttered, but then decided not to delve too deeply into that line of thought.

An act, huh...? "You know, that might not actually be a bad idea," I said.

"Yeah, agreed," said Tomoyo. "Not exactly original, but classics are classic for a reason."

A play. *Drama*. It was a staple among staples in your typical cultural festival's schedule—as clichéd as cliché could be—and as a result, it hadn't even occurred to us to consider it as an option.

"Man, that one didn't cross my mind at *all*!" I said. "You'd think that would've been the first idea on the board too!"

"Probably because the drama club's doing a full-blown play on the stage in the gym," said Tomoyo. "That kinda had me thinking that plays were off the table from the get-go."

“Oh, yeah, I get that. You end up thinking they got to it first,” I said with a nod.

“Indeed—but that does not, in fact, mean that the drama club has the *exclusive* right to put on a play,” Sayumi said. “As it so happens, there were classes that decided to put on plays both last year and the year before that, both in addition to the drama club’s performance.”

Sayumi then began running through the proposal in more concrete terms. “With only the five of us available as our cast, it would have to be a rather small-scale play...but considering that the music room is rather cramped for a play to begin with, that limited scale may prove to be just what we need. And most importantly, drama is an indisputable form of literature in its own right. In other words, it’s an option that would be truly suitable for a literary club to choose, one we can execute without fear of judgment.”

“Yeah, good point,” I agreed. “If we’re doing a play, we can get away with so much more than if we were doing a concert or comedy or whatever! Even if it kinda sucks, people will say the jank just adds to the charm!”

“I would prefer *not* to agree with such a pessimistic viewpoint...but I suppose I can’t deny it either,” Sayumi said with a distinct wince. “The fact that it’s such a common option means that most people have *some* degree of experience with acting, so they will be inclined to judge us less harshly than they otherwise might.”

I’m not trying to make light of plays, or acting, or anything like that, to be clear! The fact remains, however, that when it comes to performances that a bunch of rank and file amateurs could attempt, putting on a play is a lower bar to clear than trying to form a band or a comedy group. And *then* there’s the fact that when bands or comedians suck, the reactions they tend to get are, well, brutal. I was kinda terrified of having to face that myself.

“What do you think, Chifuyu? Could you act in a play?” I asked.

“...Ugh!” Chifuyu grunted out of nowhere. “Ugh! Ugh!”

“Chifuyu... I think you’ve been stuck on that bit for a little too long, now. It’s been a whole day already.” I had never been able to figure out what got her into these moods, and it was clear that wasn’t going to change anytime soon.

For the moment, though, it seemed like a clear enough sign that she was down for the idea. “Anyway, looks like you’re raring to go, huh?”

“Yeah. I wanna try it,” Chifuyu said, laying off her fake grunting to clench her fists with determination.

“Have you ever acted before?” I asked.

“I played the princess when we did *Sleeping Beauty* at school,” said Chifuyu.

“Oh, dang! That’s really something—you had the starring role! Did it go okay?”

“Yeah. It was great. I fell asleep partway through, and when I woke up, the play was over.”

“You mean the princess never woke up in the end?!”

In the context of *Sleeping Beauty*, an ending in which the princess doesn’t wake up would turn the play into a tragedy, no two ways about it. Considering Chifuyu said the play went well, I could only imagine what sort of emergency measures they’d had to take to cope with their unconscious star. *Maybe Kuki improvised a new ending on the spot?*

In any case, we’d all had the chance to express our opinions, and nobody had shown any opposition in particular to staging a play. Hatoko, it seemed, hadn’t expected her proposal to go over *that* well, and she was now feeling quite a bit of pressure, judging by the anxious look on her face.

“I-Is this really okay?” she asked. “I was just throwing out ideas—I didn’t really think it through at all...”

“No worries there. I think it’s a great idea,” I said. Meanwhile, Tomoyo wrote “Play” down on the whiteboard, which would prove to be the final idea that she had to record.

“I believe we’ve reached a decision, then,” Sayumi said as she glanced around the room, taking note of our expressions. “Our literary club will stage a play for this year’s cultural festival.”

A circle was drawn around the word “Play,” and our plan was set in stone. We’d decided to put on a play...but what play would we decide to put on? Find

out after the commercial break!

Scene 3. As You Loathe It

Romeo and Juliet: a play penned by the English dramatist William Shakespeare. Though generally classified as a tragedy, it wasn't *quite* heart-wrenching enough to earn a place alongside Shakespeare's Four Great Tragedies, those being *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*. Its central theme, in short: forbidden love.

We lay our scene in fair Verona, a metropolitan city of Italy. There lives Romeo, heir to House Montague, and Juliet, the sole daughter of House Capulet. A chance encounter at a party ends with the two falling instantly and madly in love with each other...but their houses are the bitterest of enemies. In this era of Verona's history, noble houses were divided based upon their support of either the Holy Roman emperor or the pope. The Montagues are supporters of the emperor, while the Capulets side with the pope, and as a result, the two houses have spent years and years engaging in an intense, often bloody feud.

Within all that open antagonism, the two houses' progenies fall in love. Fate, however, stands in the way of that love ever reaching fulfillment. As if to laugh in the face of the young couple's budding romance, relations between the two houses deteriorate further still. It seems inevitable that the irresistible tides of destiny will tear them apart...but that's when a plan is hatched.

Juliet chooses to drink a poison that will cause her to appear dead then awaken some time later, a plot that will unshackle her from the bonds her family have imposed on her and free her to live with Romeo. Romeo, however, is never informed of this plan. Convinced that Juliet has truly died, he makes his way to her body and poisons himself with a truly lethal toxin, choosing to join her in death. When Juliet awakens and realizes that her plan has caused the death of her one true love, she falls into despair and throws herself upon Romeo's sword. Finally, when the Montague and Capulet houses learn of Romeo's and Juliet's deaths and the irresistible love that burned between them, their leaders choose to bring an end to the feud. So ends the lovers' star-

crossed tale...

“...is the essence of the story, broadly speaking,” Sayumi said, pausing for a moment after she concluded her explanation. Our usual members had once again gathered up in the club room after school. This time, each of us was holding a sheet of paper with information relating to *Romeo and Juliet* written on it.

After deciding that we’d be putting on a play the day before, we split up for the afternoon to go home and think about which play we wanted to put on. When we got back together again, however, most of the proposals people brought to the table—“Snow White,” “Cinderella,” “Momotarou”—weren’t exactly the sort of stuff that you’d expect from a high school’s cultural festival. We reached a consensus that it would be nice to do something a little more highbrow, and that’s when I proposed that we do something by Shakespeare, which prompted Sayumi to suggest that *Romeo and Juliet* would be appropriate. She threw together the documents we were perusing, gave us an explanation of the play’s story, and that brings us back to the present moment.

“Huh,” I said. “I guess I never really knew what *Romeo and Juliet* was like as a story, actually.” I’d known the title, of course, and I’d known what happens in very broad strokes, but I’d never read the script nor watched a performance of the play before. The only details I’d been aware of were the “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo” scene on the balcony, and also that a series of misunderstandings led to the two leads dying in the end.

“I gotta say, I was pretty surprised to hear *you* suggest Shakespeare. Kinda intellectual for your usual taste, isn’t it?” Tomoyo commented.

I could tell that she was making light of me, but I responded with a chuckle and a smirk anyway. ““All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players,”” I recited.

“...Excuse me?” said Tomoyo.

“Shakespeare said that.”

“Right, okay. And?”

“ ... ”

“Shakespeare said it. So what?”

“No, I mean... You can’t just... This is just one of those *things*, you know? Like, where I drop a really great Shakespeare quote and then we just move along, right...?”

I really loved Shakespeare. I’d never read even a single one of his works, I hadn’t seen any of his plays either, I had no interest in his personal history, and judging by his portraits, I wasn’t exactly into his looks either—but nevertheless, I loved him. Why? I couldn’t say. I just knew that something about him being the author of the Four Great Tragedies, something about the *meter* of his name, was just...just *great*. Shakespeare: hella cool.

“Oookay, I get it now,” said Tomoyo. “This is one of those ‘Quoting Shakespeare makes me hella cool!’ things, isn’t it? You’re being all pretentious even though you don’t actually know crap about him.”

“Agh!” I choked. I had nothing to say against that. It was, well, just one of those things.

Characters who quoted famous sayings or pieces of literature just looked so *erudite* and *awesome* and stuff! Not just Shakespeare either—it worked with Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Pascal, Ortega, Thomas Aquinas, Dazai Osamu, even the Bible! The urge to pluck a particularly apt sample of their words and use it to argue someone into submission or cheer up one of your friends was overwhelming! Not to mention the ability to go the opposite route and say something like “So-and-so said this, but you know what? I think the opposite,” arguing *against* the words of one of those eminent figures! Famous quotes: *hella cool*!

“You *don’t* know crap about Shakespeare, do you? I’d totally bet on it,” said Tomoyo.

“D-D-Don’t be ridiculous!” I shouted. “Of course I do! I know *tons* about him! Like, I know that he was *way* balder than you’d think he’d be!”

“Suuure,” said Tomoyo. “In that case, why don’t you tell me a little more about that quote from a minute ago? Did Shakespeare himself say that, or was it a quote from one of his works?”

I gasped. *How dare you! That's the worst possible question you could've asked me!* I'd found the line on the internet when I was looking around for cool Shakespeare quotes, and I had no clue whatsoever what its context was. If she'd asked me about the quote's *meaning*, I could've gone off on a tangent about my own personal interpretation of it and thrown her off the trail, but a question about its *origins* allowed me no such easy out.

And, actually...the way she figured out what question would put me on the spot the most with such instant, pinpoint precision has gotta mean something, right? She's been here too, hasn't she? That girl's definitely looked up famous quotes online herself, for sure!

We didn't do things in the proper "Read a book → Find a famous quote → Show it off in conversation" order. No, our procedure looked more like "Feel a desire to show off quotes in conversation → Go out proactively looking for them." In other words, the opposite of how the rest of the world did things. Tomoyo *had* to be in the same boat—otherwise, she wouldn't have known that questions about the quote's origins were my weak point.

A thousand curses... Just look at that grin on her face! Is messing with me that fun for her?! For a moment, I seriously considered shouting, "*Objection!* The fact that you're asking me that question is undeniable proof that we're birds of a feather!" and dragging her all the way down to hell with me, but before I had the chance, Sayumi let out a sigh.

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players' is not Shakespeare's own words. They're a line spoken by Jaques, a character in the Shakespeare play *As You Like It*," she explained.

I felt my eyes widen. "Wh-Whoa, seriously? It sounded so much like something that a playwright would say, I totally assumed that Shakespeare just said it himself..."

"I imagine plenty of people are under that same misapprehension. The line has become so famous that it's taken on a life of its own. That being said, I don't think one would necessarily be mistaken to attribute the words to Shakespeare himself either. Quite a few people interpret the line to be Shakespeare speaking to the audience through one of his characters. It was far from the only time that

he related life to the stage in one of his works, after all.”

“Oooh, huh! Cool... I mean, wait! Y-Yeah! That’s it! That’s exactly what I was about to say!”

“You could hardly be any less convincing,” Sayumi said with a roll of her eyes.

“Look, Andou,” said Tomoyo. “Let’s try to learn from this and stop quoting books that you haven’t even read, okay? If you wanna quote Shakespeare, then at least read his plays first!”

“Don’t get me wrong, Tomoyo... I don’t give a crap about *Shakespeare* at all. All I want is for people to think that I’m a superintellectual who knows all *about* Shakespeare!”

“Admitting that does *not* make it better!” Tomoyo shouted, but I chose to ignore her nitpicking and instead glanced across the table, where Hatoko and Chifuyu were striking up a conversation of their own.

“So, do *you* know about Shakespeare, Chifuyu?” asked Hatoko.

Chifuyu cocked her head. “Is that a new McShake?”

“Ha ha, no, no, it’s not a drink! Shakespeare was a person’s name!”

“Oh. Did he invent the McShake?”

“No, not quite! Shakespeare was—”

“Hatoko. Sandwiches were invented by the Earl of Sandwich.”

“Uh. Y-Yeah, I’ve heard that! Well, I’ve heard that’s just one theory, but—”

“So McShakes must have been invented by Shakespeare.”

“U-Umm... I-I wonder about that?”

Why’re you letting her argue into a corner, Miss High Schooler? I had to admit, though, that watching the two of them talk was charming in a very particular sort of way. Chifuyu was way more stubborn than you’d think, judging by her looks, and Hatoko was prone to cave to the slightest pressure (unless you were talking about comedy), creating a really backward sort of conversational power balance between them.

It felt easy to assume that Hatoko would make a good childcare worker,

considering her personality, but I had a feeling she might actually not have been cut out for that sort of job at all. From what I understood, real childcare workers needed to know how to lay down the law when push came to shove. If you couldn't shout when the situation called for it, the kids would just end up looking down on you.

Losing your voice was an occupational hazard in that line of work, apparently. Everyone knew that announcers and singers had to deal with throat pain, but surprisingly, childcare workers were right up there with them. The source for that bit of trivia: my sister. Yes, that's right—my berserker of a sibling's dream job was, *somehow*, a nursery school teacher. It didn't suit her at all, but she would definitely murder me if I said that, so I kept it to myself.

"So, anyway... Now that I'm actually looking at its story and all, *Romeo and Juliet*'s not really anything like how I imagined it," I said as I skimmed through Sayumi's summary again. "I think the most surprising part's that the whole story takes place over the course of less than a week."

Shockingly enough, the total time elapsed between Romeo and Juliet falling in love at first sight and the two of them meeting their tragic, coincidence-driven demises came out to a grand total of five days. Considering that it was one of the world's most famous love stories of all time, I'd sort of assumed that their romance would be, you know, *deep* or something, but as it turned out, it actually barely took any time at all. I'm talking *JoJo's* Part 5 levels of pacing here.

"The fact that the whole thing took five days is just the start," Tomoyo said, sounding a little perturbed. "I mean, they went from strangers to married in *two days*! That's crazy in its own right."

I nodded in agreement. Romeo and Juliet met and fell in love one day, then were married the day after. Then a bunch of stuff happened, a couple days passed by, and five days from their first encounter, their feelings for each other had gotten them killed. If some love affairs burned like a flame, then *theirs* exploded like a can of lighter fluid.

I know it might sound ridiculous to say this about a world-renowned masterpiece, but, like...from a modern perspective, the whole story was a little

hard to take seriously at face value. Oh, and for bonus points, in the original work, Romeo was sixteen years old, and Juliet was fourteen. With *that* fact in mind, it was hard to see the story as anything other than a youthful indiscretion blown way out of proportion. A couple teens going wild, if you will. I sure as heck never would've guessed that Romeo was supposed to be *younger* than me, anyway.

"It *is* hard to focus on anything other than the timeline when viewing the story in the form of an outline, yes. When viewed as a play or a ballet, however, it's much easier to not be bothered by that aspect," Sayumi said, then she seemed to realize something. "Come to think of it, I suppose I didn't even think twice about revealing the twist in my summary. I hope none of you mind?"

"Wait, mind what?" I asked.

"I mean, I hope you don't mind that I spoiled the play's ending."

Ooh, I get it now. Yeah, I guess that is technically a spoiler, isn't it? "Nah, it's cool. I already knew how *Romeo and Juliet* ended anyway."

Tomoyo, Hatoko, and Chifuyu all confirmed that they'd already known as well. I wasn't super surprised to find that the one thing all of us had known about the play was that the main characters died in the end.

"I can't explain why, but that's the one part you just sort of end up absorbing," I said. "I don't even remember *how* I learned that."

"It *is* a world-famous play, I suppose," said Sayumi. "It's referenced in all sorts of works, spanning all mediums and genres all across the world, and there are countless parodies of *Romeo and Juliet* as well. There's no end of opportunities to learn about the play's particulars. The fact that its ending being spoiled is more or less an inevitability is an unfortunate byproduct of its popularity, I suppose."

Hmm. So even fame has its drawbacks—or, you might say, fame makes works fall short on a certain criterion! The more famous a work grew, the more people would learn about it, and the more spoilers would fly all over the place in unexpected forms. You could end up learning all about a work without even realizing it, which was pretty unfortunate considering that in my book, the best way to enjoy a work was to approach it with a totally blank slate.

“Oh, you know, I think I know what you mean,” said Hatoko. “I watched *Titanic* for the first time the other day. It was really good, and I was just *sobbing* by the end of it...but, well, I *knew* that the boat was going to sink from the very beginning, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, there’s no way you *couldn’t* know,” I said. I’d never even seen *Titanic*, and even I knew that the boat sank in the end. I’d seen it referenced so many times in manga and TV shows that I’d just passively absorbed the knowledge. This was, indeed, a criterion upon which famous works came up lacking. “It really just *happens*, doesn’t it? You learn all sorts of things about the big masterpieces without even realizing it. Like, I’ve never seen the first *Gundam* series, but I already know about the ‘Amuro! Launch!’ line.”

“Oh, yeah! I know that one too!” Hatoko exclaimed. The fact that *she* was familiar with it really went to show how much the line had entered into the public consciousness.

“Yeah, people in our generation kinda just end up learning this stuff,” said Tomoyo. “Like, I only got into *JoJo’s* because of all the parodies I ended up getting exposed to.”

“I get that. Man, I *totally* get that,” I said. I couldn’t have agreed more, really. To borrow a piece of kinda dated slang, I *really* knew that feel.

JoJo’s was a true classic of a manga that had been running since before I was born, so it went without saying that I hadn’t been following it in real time until long after it began. As a result, I was exposed to the countless manga and anime that parodied *JoJo’s* long before I’d actually begun reading the original work. I saw all the most famous lines—like “But I refuse,” “Oh? You’re approaching me?” and “It was me, Dio!”—in the form of memes long before I saw them in context. You’d think the process would go “Read the original work → Understand the meme,” but instead it was flipped on its head, turning into “Where *did* this meme come from? → Read the original work.” In this day and age, you couldn’t really blame anyone for approaching the classics in that manner.

“When you really think about it, that sorta stuff happens all the time, doesn’t it?” I said. “Like, by the time I started reading *Dragon Ball* it had already ended,

and I knew about Super Saiyans before I even picked up the first volume. I was actually looking forward to seeing *when* Goku would turn into one as I read through it.”

In a certain sense, the existence of Super Saiyans was a *ginormous* spoiler for that series...but at this point, nobody bothered treating it that way at all. Super Saiyans were all over the place in the trailers for the movies, even.

“And y’know those ‘masterpiece scenes in animation’ TV programs they put on sometimes? Those are just treasure troves of spoilers,” I continued. “They spoil the scene where Clara stands up in *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*, they spoil the scene where Nello dies in *Dog of Flanders*, they spoil the big confession of love in *Touch*, and they spoil the ‘He stole your heart’ scene in *The Castle of Cagliostro*!”

“Well, what else are they supposed to do? You can’t exactly talk about that sort of famous scene without spoiling it,” said Tomoyo.

“Well, I mean, *yeah*,” I admitted. “And if you don’t wanna get spoiled, I guess you can always just not watch it.”

Then there was the fact that if it weren’t for programs like that, younger generations would probably never be exposed to or develop an interest in those old classic shows in the first place. So, the question was—just how far does one have to go in being wary of spoiling stuff? Do spoilers have a statute of limitations?

Hmm. Yeah, this is a pretty tough one. I guess that’s a criterion that parody ethics don’t quite live up to.

“It kinda gets you thinking, doesn’t it?” I said. “Like, there’s clearly a spoiler gap between the previous generation and us, so it stands to reason that there’s gonna be another gap between us and the next generation, doesn’t it?”

“I mean, you’d think, *yeah*,” said Tomoyo.

“Like, doesn’t it feel like a lot of kids these days don’t know the first thing about *Yu-Gi-Oh!* the manga, even though they still love the card game?”

“I guess, *yeah*, but that’s just how it goes. Times change.”

“Y’know how that one tutoring company used Heidi as their mascot for a while? Makes you wonder if kids these days think they’re the ones who invented the character.”

“Yeah, as if! Probably!” Tomoyo jabbed, albeit with a bit less confidence than she usually did.

We’d sunk very deep into the dilemma of parodies, spoilers, and the generation gap. As we paused to ponder the issue, however...

“Well, as long as spoilers aren’t an issue in *this* context, I suggest we return to the topic at hand.”

...Sayumi stepped in to set us back on track, at long last.

“First, to confirm: is everyone in agreement that we’ll be putting on *Romeo and Juliet* as our play of choice?” Sayumi asked, restoring a degree of presidential formality to the proceedings. All of us nodded, and nobody voiced any objections, so Sayumi moved us right along. “Very good. In that case, I believe we can make this decision official.”

“Oh, but Sayumi—can we actually pull *Romeo and Juliet* off? Like, practically speaking?” I asked.

“Pull it off in what sense?”

“Like, in terms of having enough time or people. We only have the five of us, right? And this play’s a full-on masterpiece, so memorizing the script sounds like it could be pretty rough...”

“There are plenty of ways in which we could compensate for those issues,” Sayumi explained. “I’ll grant you that staging the play precisely as written in the original script would be untenable, but with sufficient cuts and adjustments, I believe we’ll be able to manage.”

“So, like, we’ll abridge it?”

“Correct. You’re far from a rare case in terms of your knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet*, Andou. Plenty of people are vaguely aware of the play’s broad strokes and ending, despite having never read the original work or seen it staged. As such, so long as we can portray the most important scenes—the

famous ones that everyone knows about—and omit the rest of the story, covering details through narration as necessary, our audience will be able to understand the story in spite of its abridged nature.”

“Yeah, okay, I get it now. We can just summarize the bits we skip, yeah!”

“In terms of time, I imagine that a twenty-minute production would be just about right. Any longer and our audience is likely to lose interest, and considering how long we have to prepare and our current level of acting ability, a twenty-minute play is probably about right to begin with. Assuming we can time the play properly, I believe we could fit...oh, three or four performances in a day.”

Sayumi moved from one topic to the next, presenting her ideas one after another, and I was honestly really impressed. It really did all make sense, and I understood now why she’d proposed we put on *Romeo and Juliet* in particular. Choosing that play meant that we could shorten its run time as much as possible, making it a much less heavy undertaking for both us and the audience. After all, the fact that it was a world-famous masterpiece meant that we could assume that our audience would more or less know the story already, letting us trim the fat pretty ruthlessly.

As soon as people heard the title, they would already have the right ideas in mind. Sayumi, I imagined, had chosen the play based on precisely that reasoning. She hadn’t tried to shove it down our throats either. No, she’d gone out of her way to ask for all of our opinions every step of the way. Our club’s president really was a woman to be respected—she had once again displayed her truly remarkable talents, yet she’d done so in a way that *hadn’t* made it feel like she was showing them off in the slightest.

“I’m pretty impressed, Sayumi,” I said. “I have to admit, when you proposed *Romeo and Juliet*, my first thought was ‘Oh, huh, I guess Sayumi’s into some surprisingly girly stuff after all.’ Allow me to formally apologize for my terrible misapprehension!”

“Oh...? Is *that* what you thought?”

I could sense the beginnings of a glare coming on, so I frantically moved things forward while I still could. “U-Umm... *Right!* Okay, so, we should decide which

scenes we'll be putting into our abridged play next!" I shouted, then gave Sayumi's documents another quick skim. "Okay, so, the bits that we definitely *can't* leave out are the 'Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?' balcony scene—that's the most famous one and all—plus the scene where they die at the end," I muttered to myself.

"Andou...?" Chifuyu said, sounding utterly crestfallen. "Do Romeo and Juliet die?"

"Uh..."

"Do they die?"

"Yeah, umm... I mean, that's just how the story goes. They kinda *have* to. This is a tragedy about star-crossed lovers, so no real choice."

My attempt at an explanation just made Chifuyu look more upset than ever. "I don't want them to die," she eventually said. It sort of sounded like she was throwing a tantrum, but there was also a hint of stubborn insistence to her tone. "I don't want them to die. It'd be better if Romeo and Juliet live."

"But that'd ruin the whole—"

"I don't like sad stories. I like happy stories."

"I *get* that, but it'd be a total betrayal of, like, *Romeo and Juliet's* core—"

"It's a story, so everyone should be happy in the end."

"..."

"I want to save Romeo and Juliet."

"...?!"

I felt like...I don't know...like my mind had been totally blown, I guess. The look in Chifuyu's eyes was so innocent, so unblemished by the harsh truths of reality, that I found myself at a loss for words. She was pure—*overwhelmingly* pure! *Purely* pure, even! *Puarly* pure, even!

...Okay, this is getting silly now. The point is that, in the face of her exceedingly pure and innocent ideology, I found myself completely unable to mount an argument. I felt like I'd just been forced to look myself in the mirror

and acknowledge how base and unsightly my own worldview was.

“Chifuyu...how are you so, so nice?” I whimpered. “Compared to *you*, I’m... I’m just plain...”

“Wh-Whoa there, Andou, melodramatic much?”

“Tomoyo... I feel so *petty* right now... How could I be so pathetically narrow-minded? When did I become the sort of person who thinks ‘You just *know* nobody’s going to die in this story, so it has no stakes at all’ and ‘Man, it kills all my hype for a series when characters come back to life’ when I read shonen manga? How did I never see what a sad little man that makes me?”

“On second thought, maybe you *should* try to do better!”

Indeed—I *could* do better. I *had* to. I had been an utter, disgraceful fool. It was high time that I discarded sad, cynical viewpoints like “It’s fun when main characters get killed off left and right.” After all—why would you ever *want* your friends to die? Isn’t that the *last* thing that should be desirable? Why would you *complain* about plot contrivances bringing them back to life? That’s something to *celebrate*! And if nobody dies in the first place, then all the better! Who among us can *truly* say that they’d prefer a heart-wrenchingly tragic ending over a touchingly happy one?

“Mwa ha ha... It seems I might be losing my edge,” I muttered.

I had allowed myself to be bound by prejudice—snared by preconception. I had *abandoned* the notion that Romeo and Juliet could ever be saved from their tragic fate. I had unwittingly sank into the prescriptive framework of common sense, but Chifuyu, a girl whose ideas could *never* be so easily shackled, had set me free once more!

“Who says that every tragedy has to end poorly?! If that’s a rule, then I’ll *smash* it with my own two hands! Who the *hell* decided that Romeo and Juliet *have* to die?!”

“I mean. Shakespeare?”

“...”

Tomoyo’s retort was short, swift, and lethally simple.

Well, I mean...yeah. True enough. If that's how the author wrote the story, then that's how it goes. I guess tragedies really do have to end poorly. That's just how entertainment works. My energy levels had skyrocketed, then just as swiftly came crashing back down to earth in catastrophic fashion.

In the meantime, however, everyone else seemed to have more or less accepted Chifuyu's idea.

"A happy ending where Romeo and Juliet don't die...? Yeah, I like that! Nice idea, Chifuyu!" Hatoko said with a broad smile.

"I think it's a good idea, but, well... What do you think, Sayumi?" asked Tomoyo. "Is messing with the plot that much on the table?"

"I would venture to say it certainly is," said Sayumi. "Furthermore, modifying the script—or rather, making our play into a derivative work based on the original—makes the activity even more appropriate for the literary club than ever, so I would outright endorse the decision. In a certain sense, toying with the script is a privilege unique to rank and file amateurs like us. The drama club certainly doesn't have the freedom to play that fast and loose with their scripts."

Tomoyo and Sayumi, it seemed, were fully on board as well. Our youngest member's innocent idea officially had the full club's endorsement.

"All right, sounds like a plan!" I said. "Sorry, Shakespeare, but *our* play's gonna end with Romeo and Juliet alive and well!" The next step, however, would be the tricky part. Changing the ending was all well and good, but if we changed the core hook of the story *too* much, then you could argue it would cease to be *Romeo and Juliet* altogether. "How do you think we should change the ending, Chifuyu? Any ideas for how we could make this work?"

"Yeah. It's easy," said Chifuyu.

"Huh? It is?"

"They can just come back to life."

"They can *come back*?" I repeated, cocking my head.

Chifuyu pointed to the outline in her hands. "In this part, Juliet drinks a potion

and falls asleep,” she said confidently.

“Right. That’s how she fakes her death.”

“Then Romeo shows up and drinks poison.”

“Yeah, since he thinks his one true love is dead and all.”

“Then Juliet wakes up.”

Normally, that would be the part where Juliet realizes her plan went off the rails and resulted in her own lover’s death, so she decides to stab herself in the chest. Chifuyu, however, had a different idea.

“She can just smooch him instead,” she said, her tone *perfectly* serious even as she said the word “smooch.”

“U-Umm,” I stammered. “So, she just...kisses him? That’s it?”

“Yeah. They smooch, then Romeo comes back to life.”

“*Ooh*, I get it now! So it’d be like how *Sleeping Beauty* ends? A kiss brings him back with the power of love?”

It was a well-established trope, that was for sure. Kisses having the power to break curses and revive the dead was a concept that turned up in fairy tales all over the world and throughout all eras of history.

“Smooching makes everything better,” Chifuyu explained. In her innocent little world, kisses were all powerful.

But, I mean...man. I sure wish she’d stop saying “smooch” so much. Getting really hard to keep a straight face over here. I’ve been going out of my way to steer her toward “kiss,” and it’s just not happening! Something about seeing the word “smooch” pass through her little lips just felt, well...*wrong*, in a way that made me feel weirdly guilty. It was, like...tantalizing, I guess? Or maybe suffocating? Instigating, possibly?

“A-A kiss, huh...?”

“Yeah... A kiss...”

“A kiss, is it...?”

Tomoyo, Hatoko, and Sayumi were all blushing, and they all looked equally

uncomfortable with the suggestion. Chifuyu's idea had been driven by pure, childish innocence, but the fact of the matter was that a kiss was both a pure, holy gesture *and* an act with an overt sexual nuance at the same time. All of the high schoolers present—me included—were seriously shaken by this turn of events. It was just...*purely* awkward. We were almost shockingly at the mercy of our adolescent hormones.

"I-In any case!" Sayumi said, raising her voice in an effort to overcome the uncomfortable mood settling over us. "Before we decide anything specific about how we'll be altering the play, I suggest we assign our roles. Focusing in on one aspect of the production too much would be inefficient, after all...and how we choose to change the story will likely be impacted by who we assign as our scriptwriter and what parts each of us will be playing."

She was absolutely right, and the rest of us quickly switched gears. We couldn't just sit there and be awkward about the word "smooch" forever.

"Our roles, eh...? Well, I guess I'm Romeo, to start," I said, gesturing toward myself with my thumb. "I don't think anyone else here could fill *those* shoes."

"Yeah, that's true," said Hatoko. "You're the only boy in our club, after all!"

"I mean, I sorta assumed you'd end up in the role...but still, I'm surprised," said Tomoyo.

"Surprised by what?"

"Well, you always talk a big game and go to wild extremes when you're with *us*, but then you take one step outside the room and turn into a mild-mannered little wuss. Figured you wouldn't be into acting in front of a big crowd."

"Wow, *rude!*"

"I guess you could say you're a shy showoff, in a word."

"Since when was my personality a paradox?!" *And how dare you make all these claims that I can't really bring myself to disagree with? Just because it's true doesn't mean you can just come out and say it!* "I mean...it's not like I'm chomping at the bit to play the role or anything. I was actually thinking along the same lines as Hatoko—I'm the only guy in the club, so it just makes sense for me to do it."

Saying that the role had fallen to me by process of elimination made it sound kinda bad, but, well, that was more or less exactly what had happened. I'd figured it would be better to show some spirit, step up, and volunteer for the role rather than waiting for someone else to punt it my way. I was hoping it would help everyone else feel motivated, and...honestly, a little part of me really *did* just plain want to give it a try.

"I mean, if somebody else wants to be Romeo, I'm okay with talking it out," I offered, but nobody took me up on it. Nobody had said a word, but it seemed everyone had been assuming I'd be Romeo from the get-go.

"Okay, that's settled. Andou's Romeo," Tomoyo said as she wrote my role down on the white board.

"Andou's Romeo," Chifuyu quietly repeated the words to herself. "Andou comes back to life after a smooch."

"Wait, no, no—we haven't set that plot point in stone yet, Chifuyu," I quickly clarified. *And really, would you stop saying "smooch" already? Like, for real? The more you say it, the more awkward the mood gets!* "But, huh... I guess playing Romeo *does* mean that if we go with Chifuyu's ending, Juliet and I will have to kiss in the end?"

I hadn't really meant to mutter that out loud, but the second the words left my mouth, Tomoyo and Hatoko blushed beet red.

"Wh-What the hell are you *talking* about, Andou?! O-O-Of *course* you won't *actually* kiss! It's called *acting*!"

"Th-Th-That's right, Juu! K-Kissing for real in a play is, umm...umm... I-It's just not okay!"

"I-I get it, jeez!"

"Andou," said Sayumi, "I believe this *should* go without saying, but the kiss scene would, in fact, be staged. If your expectations were raised for something untoward, then it would be in your best interest to readjust them immediately and abandon whatever outrageous fantasies you may be imagining." Her tone was as cold and scathing as a blizzard, but she *also* said the whole spiel at a suspiciously breakneck pace. It wasn't hard to tell that she was just feigning

calmness and was actually thoroughly shaken on the inside.

I was coming to a striking new realization: all of the high schoolers in the literary club were *really* bad at dealing with even vaguely indecent topics. I was no exception to that, by the way. Literally all of us were blushing at this point...

“O-Okay! Let’s keep these role assignments moving!” I shouted, forcing all of *those* thoughts out of my mind and dragging the conversation forward.

“Romeo’s all settled, so I figure it only makes sense to do Juliet next!”

Juliet was the other leading role—the main heroine, as it were. In a certain sense, she was the most standout role in the entire play.

“Okay! Everyone who wants to play the main heroine, raise your hand!”

A mere moment after the words left my mouth, I was blown away.



The scene before me made my jaw drop. There was Tomoyo, shyly glancing away from me. Hatoko, smiling in that awkward, embarrassed sort of way. Chifuyu, posture inexplicably proud and perfect. Sayumi, silent and stone-faced. They were all handling it in their own distinct ways, but they were all performing the same gesture: each of the four had raised their hand.

“Wha—?!”

“Huh?! ”

“Oooh.”

“Ah?! ”

The four prospective Juliets gasped as they noticed they weren’t alone. They glanced around at each other with looks of surprise and apprehension in their eyes. The role, it seemed, was more sought-after than any of them had anticipated.

“O-Oh, huh... Guess *everyone* wants to give it a try,” I said.

This came as a bit of a shock to me as well. For better or for worse, none of the members of our club were particularly assertive people. I hadn’t thought that *all* of them would want a chance in the spotlight—in fact, I’d half expected *nobody* to step up.

But then again...maybe saying that they weren’t assertive wasn’t quite right. It was more like none of them wanted to stand out in a bad way, or like they were all unusually capable of reading the room and acting accordingly, I guess?

If I had to put it into words... Basically, they were the sort of people who wouldn’t put themselves out there and proactively participate in class activities, but who *also* wouldn’t try to ditch them. They’d fill their role as well as was expected of them, making sure that they slotted nicely into the class dynamic. They were the sort of people who valued social harmony, basically. Chifuyu was the one arguable exception, but even though she was moody and gave up on things at the drop of a hat, it *did* seem plausible that her whims would lead her to get in the spirit of events like these.

“More than anything, I’m surprised you’re up for this, Tomoyo,” I said. “Never

thought you were the type.”

Tomoyo took in a sharp breath. “A-And? Got a problem with that?! So I wanna play Juliet—what’s it to you?!”

“I never said it was a *bad* thing. Jeez...” *And anyway, you talked a big game about me being a mild-mannered wuss in public, but how do you have the right to get on a high horse about that? I’ve seen you in class! I know how ridiculously well-behaved you are there!*

When Tomoyo was in public, she made *very* sure to never let any of her nerdy interests slip out and put her usually razor-sharp comments and comebacks on ice. Her rhetorical blade was kept permanently in its scabbard. In other words, she was just like me: when she wasn’t around people who she knew well, she clammed right up and stayed that way. It was almost unthinkable for someone like *her* to step up and volunteer for the leading role in a play.

“L-Look, just drop it, okay?! It’s none of your business anyway!” Tomoyo yelled.

“I mean, it really is? I’m gonna be playing Romeo, you know? That means that if you end up playing Juliet, we’ll have to act like we’re in love.”

Tomoyo let out a strangled, wheezing gasp. “I-I *know*, duh! That’s why... I mean, no, like... *Agggh*, just *shut up*, okay?! Who gives a crap if I want to play the lead part?! Shouldn’t you be *supportive* when someone who’s usually shy tries to put themselves out there?!”

“Okay, but...wouldn’t it be *worse* if I tried being all supportive? It’d be like I was rubbing your face in it,” I countered. When someone who’s usually shy tries to put themselves out there, it’s good manners to play that fact up as little as humanly possible. Being all “Well, *somebody’s* in a social mood today! Good for you!” is a good way to make your friends want to murder you.

Anyway, Tomoyo was in a pretty frantic frame of mind, obviously...but the weird part was that this time, it wasn’t *just* Tomoyo.

“I-I’ve, well... I’ve never played the lead role in something like this, so I thought, hey, maybe I should give it a try this time! I-I mean, I’m the one who said we should do a play in the first place, right?!” stammered Hatoko.

“Per ordinary standards...as both the president of our club and the eldest among us, I believe it would be appropriate for me to play the leading role. Moreover, I’m confident that my acting and vocal projection abilities are more than a match for anyone’s,” Sayumi said, her tone unyielding.

Sayumi and Hatoko both preferred to avoid conflict whenever possible, and I’d been operating under the assumption that in times of conflict, they’d be the first to step back and make concessions to bring the dispute to a close. Today, however, neither of them showed any intention of backing down. They were attached to the role of Juliet to a kind of crazy degree.

“I’ll play Juliet,” said Chifuyu. She was, well...honestly, this was pretty much normal for her, as much as Chifuyu’s behavior could *ever* be called normal.

Silent sparks flew between the four girls of the literary club. Each had laid down their intent to claim the leading role in our play, and now they were caught in a four-way deadlock, keeping a careful and constant eye on each other but unable to make a move.

“Well, this is kind of a pain,” I muttered as I scratched my head. I’d never anticipated that anyone would end up *fighting* over their roles in the play. I’d figured we’d be trying to push the leading roles off on each other, if anything, but instead, they were vying to claim it for themselves. “So, how are we gonna deal with this?” I asked, thinking that we could play rock paper scissors, draw straws, talk it through a little more, or maybe even hold auditions.

“You decide, Andou,” said Chifuyu as she pointed directly at me.

“Huh? *Me?*”

“You’re Romeo, so you should pick a Juliet,” Chifuyu explained.

I stared at Chifuyu in horror. *Okay, now that’s the most unreasonable proposal she could’ve come up with! I’m supposed to pick a Juliet? She wants to let me make the call on who should be our main heroine unilaterally, with nothing more than my own personal biases to base it on, while everyone seems like they’re at least half ready to come to blows over it? Nooope, nope nope nope nope!*

“Ch-Chifuyu,” I said, “Just because I’ll be playing Romeo doesn’t mean that I

should have to take responsibility for a choice *that—*”

“No...she has a point,” Tomoyo said before I could finish explaining why there was no way in hell I’d be making that decision. “You playing Romeo is set in stone, so I don’t think anyone would complain if you made the call.”

“H-Hey, Tomoyo...?”

“I like that idea too!” Hatoko chimed in.

“Seriously, Hatoko? You too...?” I sighed.

“I think everyone here would be able to accept it if you decide, Juu, no matter who you pick,” Hatoko continued. “So? Who do you want to play Juliet?”

“Yes, why not? Let’s have Andou decide,” said Sayumi, jumping on the bandwagon.

“E-Even you, Sayumi...?”

“Dragging out the debate any longer than we already have would accomplish nothing aside from wasting time, and making the decision randomly—say, with rock paper scissors—would leave everyone unconvinced that we’d made the right decision. And, moreover...”

“Moreover?”

“I must admit—I’m curious to see who you’ll choose,” Sayumi said with a slight smile. It was the same sort of smile that gamblers put on when they were really into the game—a somewhat inflammatory smile, even.

Okay, this is weird. This is really weird! Sayumi’s supposed to be fair and impartial, no matter what! She never lets her personal feelings interfere with her ability to make clear, rational judgments, regardless of what situation she’s in...but I’m pretty darn sure that was a super personal-feelings-driven decision right there! Why, though? Is she going crazy? Is everyone going crazy?!

“Come on, Andou,” said Chifuyu, who had walked over to me while I was too busy freaking out to pay attention. She gazed up at me, her eyes shimmering with anticipation. “Hurry up and choose. Who would you be happiest to have playing Juliet?”

“Huh?!” Wait, did the goal here just totally change?! When did this stop being

“Who’s the best fit for the Juliet role?” and start being “Who does Andou, personally, want to play Juliet?” We’re clearly shifting away from the original point of all this!

Nevertheless, nobody bothered to call out the blatant shift. They just looked at me, their gazes full of hope and expectation.

“Andou?”

“Juu?”

“Andou.”

“Go on, Andou.”

I didn’t even realize they had been driving me backward until I bumped up against the corner I’d been herded into. You’d *think* that having four girls compete for my favor like this would make me feel like the master of a harem, but no, that was the farthest thing from my mind. This was no harem—it was a war zone. What other words could you use to describe being surrounded by girls and forced to choose one over the others?

Wait, wait, no, this is all wrong! Why am I being treated like some sort of four-timing sleazebag right now?! “H-Hey, wait a second, everyone! Just calm down, okay? We can talk this through!” I said, sounding for all the world like the cheating sleazebag I’d just mentally insisted I wasn’t. *Huh. Guess that explains one thing: when guys are pressed into the corner, lines like that really are the best we can do.*

Part of me wanted to run away, but the sheer earnestness of their gazes held me in place. I couldn’t go the full-on participation prize route and suggest that everyone share the lead role either. I had to choose *someone*, no matter what. She would play the cultural festival’s heroine, Juliet. She would get up onstage and act like she was in love with me.

And so...I chose...

Scene 4. What Starts Well Should End Quelled

“Oh? Your club’s going to perform *Romeo and Juliet* in the music room? Sounds like a good time—I think I’ll go check it out if I have a spare moment,” Sagami said with one of his usual dashing smiles. I’d just told him about the near bloodbath that had transpired the day before, and now he was giving me one of those half promises that made it impossible to tell whether he actually meant to come watch our play or whether he was just saying so to be polite.

“Come to think of it, are *you* doing anything for the festival, Sagami?” I asked.

“Of course not. You think I would?” said Sagami. “No, I’ll be spending this festival the same way I spent the last one: doing the bare minimum to finish the tasks our class assigns me, then wandering around at random until it’s over.”

“Hmm. Should’ve guessed,” I grunted.

Our class was putting together some sort of manga café-esque sort of setup, but neither he nor I were making any effort to directly involve ourselves in the project. We just weren’t the type, basically. I guess you could say there was a sort of unspoken acknowledgment in our class that some people just weren’t into it, or that it wasn’t part of their social role? It was one of those high school society things, really, and Sagami and I just happened to both fall into the group of students who didn’t proactively participate in any of the school’s events. Whether or not everyone in that group had *chosen* to end up in that position, of course, was a little more ambiguous.

“I think the only thing that’s going to be different this year is the girl I’ll be walking around with,” Sagami added offhandedly.

I gave him a look. “Since when did you have a new girlfriend?”

“Sometime during summer break. A high school girl who was doing sales for a doujin circle I’m into at this year’s Comiket hit on me, see. She’s a real cutie—wanna see a picture?”

“I’ll pass,” I said. “You’ll have moved on to the next girl before I can commit

her to memory regardless.”

Sagami responded to my jab with a flippant smile. “Oh? Shame,” he said as he put his phone away again.

The quality of Sagami’s looks and the quality of his personality were inversely proportional to each other, and apparently, he still hadn’t broken his habit of finding and discarding girlfriends on a regular basis. Normally, I’d be jealous of his romantic success, but he took it to such an extreme that I actually couldn’t see anything to be envious about at all in his situation.

“Okay, but wasn’t the girl you were dating last year a student at our school?” I asked. “Like, I get walking around with someone like *that*, but this new girl goes to another school, right? Are you really going to call her all the way over here for a festival like *ours*?”

Not to bad-mouth my own school or anything, but our cultural festival wasn’t exactly a large-scale event. It *was* open to the public, technically, but the vast majority of visitors were either a family member of a student or a kid from one of the local middle schools coming to take a look around. It didn’t strike me as the sort of event worth taking your significant other to.

“Trust me, I know,” said Sagami. “She lives pretty far away from here too. I couldn’t decide if I should invite her or not... But, well, you know how the festival’s on my birthday this year? The moment she learned about that, she decided to come without even waiting for me to ask her.”

“Right... I guess the festival *is* on your birthday. I totally forgot,” I lied. I did my best to feign ignorance, but the truth is that I’d very much remembered. However much I wished I didn’t—however much I wanted to forget about it—Sagami’s birthday was stuck in my mind for good. It was September nineteenth—or rather, “ninedeeth,” in the Fukushima dialect.

“I hope you’re getting me something nice this year, Andou,” said Sagami.

“Hell no,” I replied.

“Miser.”

“Not the point. You seriously don’t think I’ll get you a birthday present when *you’ve* never gotten *me* anything, do you? We’re not exactly on gift-giving

terms.” We were more than acquaintances, but less than friends, so I thought that was only natural.

“Oh? But wait, Andou—you gave me something once, didn’t you?” said Sagami. “You know, that film strip I really wanted?”

“I mean...that was back in the eighth grade, right? It’s been three years. And anyway, *I* didn’t give you that film strip. That was—” I began, but then my words came to an abrupt halt.

It felt like I’d picked at an old, half-healed scab. A surge of emotions emerged from within me and raced up my throat...but I swallowed them back down and kept talking as casually as I could possibly manage.

“...that was Tamaki’s present, wasn’t it?”

That’s right. I hadn’t given him that film strip—Tamaki did. She’d put her everything into figuring out what her boyfriend would like the most, and after expending no small amount of effort to obtain the perfect gift, she made sure he had the best birthday imaginable. I’d helped out a little, sure...but it was still *Tamaki’s* present, no mistaking it. It was a truly unique, one-of-a-kind symbol of the purehearted love that she had held for him.

“Ahh, right, I guess that *was* Tamaki, wasn’t it?” Sagami mused. “Not that it matters, considering I sold the thing off in the end.”

I blinked. For a moment, I couldn’t comprehend what Sagami had just said.

“You...huh? Wha... *Whaaat*?! You... You can’t be... You *sold* the film strip?! Are you serious?!” I finally shouted.

“Yup,” said Sagami. “Threw it up on Yahoo! Auctions just a little while back.”

“B-But...*why*?!”

“Needed some extra Comiket funds.”

“Are you *kidding* me?!”

“People have the right to decide what they do with their gifts, don’t they?”

“I mean,” I said, then hesitated. “Yeah, that’s true, but...you were *so* happy when you got that film strip, weren’t you? You said you’d treasure it, didn’t

you?”

“Ha ha ha ha!” Sagami chuckled. “Andou, *please*! You *know* how long ago that was! It’s been a whole three years, so of *course* my tastes would change! I’m into different things now, that’s all. I was obsessed with that anime in the eighth grade, but I’ve been over it for ages. You know exactly how that feels, don’t you? It happens all the time.”

“...”

“There’s been no word of a sequel, and the manga and mixed-media drive both ended ages ago. As far as society’s concerned, that anime’s past its prime. It had some incredible momentum going at the height of its popularity, but then it just stopped selling. It’s over—a dead IP. Which, by the way, meant that the film strip didn’t even sell for all that much in the end. Ahh, man—if I’d known it would turn out this way, I would’ve sold it the second I got my hands on the thing.”

“...”

I was at a complete loss for words. I was overwhelmed by a truly intense feeling that transcended anger, or shock, or anything along those lines. Rather, it was a truly terrible sense of exhaustion. I was too profoundly *tired* to offer a single objection. I understood all too well that Sagami Shizumu was so purely, well, *himself* that even trying to engage with him was a waste of time.

In a certain sense, he wasn’t entirely wrong. What you do with your gifts is nobody’s business but your own, and not thinking much about throwing out an ex’s present is probably what society expects from guys these days. The idea of your tastes in anime changing, of losing interest in a show that you were super into three years ago, was perfectly reasonable as well. I really *had* experienced it plenty of times myself.

Over the course of three years, a popular franchise can turn into one that’s dead in the water. Over the course of three years, the heroine you’re into can change entirely. All that has form must someday cease to be. All worldly things are impermanent. All that prospers will someday decline. *Panta rhei*.

Everything we know shifts and changes as time flows onward. Nothing is eternal, and neither nature nor the human heart are exceptions to that rule.

The fluidity of existence, the incessant shifting of reality, is one of the few things that *is* forever constant. I understood all of that, on a mental level. Still, though, I just couldn't bring myself to find peace with it.

But, well...all that being said, Sagami's detached attitude—his thoroughly *unchanging* side—was, in some ways, a lifeline for me. I knew that there was nothing malicious whatsoever about his poor behavior, which allowed me to keep my cool in the face of it. If he'd expressed the slightest hint of guilt or regret—if he'd uttered even the emptiest apology, or told me he thought he'd wronged Tamaki, even a little—I would've flown into a rage, punched him out, and *kept* punching him until I'd rearranged his pretty face so thoroughly not even the best surgeons around could put it back together again.

"By the way, getting back to the subject at hand, who *did* end up getting cast as Juliet in the end?" Sagami asked. It seemed like he either hadn't picked up on my internal conflict and turmoil at all, or otherwise knew all about it and just didn't give a crap. "It's kind of incredible, honestly. Who would've thought that *all* of them would want to play the lead role?"

"Yeah, I was surprised too," I admitted.

"Everyone's really giving it their all, aren't they?"

"No kidding. I never thought any of them were all that into stuff like the cultural festival, so it really came out of left field for me."

"Oh, no, no, not *that*. I'm talking about how they— Hmm," Sagami said, then paused for a moment. "Actually, never mind. That's not my place to say."

"What? Are you trying to imply something here?" I asked.

"When am I *not* trying to imply something?" Sagami replied. He wasn't wrong, but the fact that he seemed *proud* of it made it unspeakably insufferable. "So? Who did you choose as your Juliet?" he continued, his gaze full of curiosity.

"Who *do* you want to smooch it up with, Andou?"

"Don't say it like *that*, you creeper!" I shouted.

"But I'm just so curious! Who could your favorite be, really? I'm just *shivering* with anticipation!"

Yeah, I can tell...and it's annoying as hell. Maybe I'll get lucky and he'll finally snap, start screaming like a madman, and jump out a window. "This isn't about me having a *favorite*," I said. "We were casting a play, not having some sort of popularity contest."

"But *you* were the one who made the call, weren't you?" Sagami countered. "You chose your own Juliet—the girl who would play the role of your lover! That's barely even a step away from straight up baring your feelings to her, isn't it?"

"And that's exactly why it was such an issue," I sighed.

No matter what I did, somebody would've inevitably interpreted it in a romantic sort of light. That meant that I couldn't just choose someone at random, but I *also* hadn't been given the option of not choosing anyone at all.

"Andou. Please," said Sagami. "Stop dragging this out and tell me already. Who did you choose?"

For a moment, I didn't reply. I *really* didn't want to reply at all, but it was only a matter of time before he found out one way or another, so there wasn't any point to hiding it. And so, after a few seconds, I irritably grunted, "I picked Chifuyu."

That's right. I had chosen Himeki Chifuyu—a fourth grader—to play my Juliet.

"...Oookay. I didn't see that one coming," Sagami said, his eyes wide. "I guess I was right, then. You really *are* a lolicon."

"No, I am *not*! And what do you *mean*, you were right?!"

"It's fine, really! No need to shower me with excuses. I *get* it, genuinely. I understand everything. Chifuyu's just *that* cute, after all, and when you factor in her being an elementary schooler...why, her market value *skyrockets*! It's almost too much!"

"Oh my god, *stop*! Quit talking about a real-life grade schooler like she's some sort of commodity! You realize that people like you are *exactly* why society assumes that all anime geeks are sex offenders, right?!"

"Deep down, there isn't a man alive who doesn't love little girls. They might

not say it out loud, but the truth is that *all* of us harbor the secret desire to flirt it up with them. The law, however, says otherwise, so we're forced to settle on mature women instead."

"No, that...that's not how it works. Some people just like older women, period."

"Those people are just putting on a front. They're going for the exact opposite of their *actual* type to hide the fact that, in truth, they like 'em young."

"Like hell they are!" *Agh, I can't take much more of this! I knew he'd react this way! This is exactly why I didn't want to tell him in the first place!*

"But you know, Andou," Sagami continued, "it's pretty hard for me to take your 'not a lolicon' claims seriously when you chose Chifuyu out of a lineup like *that*. It's not like she's particularly well suited for the role, is she?"

"I mean, not really, but you know..."

"Well then, what other reason could you have, lusting after her aside?"

"At least say I'm *crushing* on her, or something!" I snapped, then I added, "I just thought picking her would leave the least hurt feelings, that's all," a moment later.

"Hmm," went Sagami, as if he'd seen through the whole situation thanks to that single comment. "Yeah, fair enough. I have to admit that when faced with the unenviable task of choosing between the four of them *without* causing any carnage, picking Chifuyu was probably your best bet. After all, she *is* a grade schooler." Sagami smiled. "And, of course, this way, you *and* the three girls who weren't chosen can just tell yourselves that it would've been immature of you to try to seriously compete against her. It's the perfect excuse."

I didn't say a word.

"You get to be the kindhearted young man who decided to grant a little girl's wish, and the other three get to tell themselves not 'Andou didn't pick me,' but 'I decided to give the grade schooler her moment in the spotlight'—and so, their pride emerges unscathed. Yes, I see now. You really *did* find a clever way to muddy the waters this time," Sagami said, once again acting like he knew it all. He'd always had a way of making it seem like he could see right through

people...or, really, he'd always had a way of making unilateral assumptions about people's motives. The fact that he wasn't entirely wrong this time just made it all the worse.

The fact that Chifuyu was still a grade schooler really *had* played a major role in me choosing her. The atmosphere in the room after everyone volunteered to play the heroine had been really weirdly heated, and perhaps as a result, the question had wildly shifted from "Who would make the best Juliet?" to "Who do I, personally, like the best?" It was a downright interrogation, and there was no way I could've *really* chosen someone under circumstances like those. I was at a loss, and in the end, the only solution I could come up with was...to choose Chifuyu, muddy the waters, and slip away from looming disaster.

"That's a very *you* solution, Andou," said Sagami. "You were thinking about everyone's best interests when you made that choice, not prioritizing one of them above all else. You were just as nice as ever...and just as naive."

"What? If you have a problem with me, then just come out and say it."

"Oh, not at all! I just thought, well—it's not *fair*, is it?" said Sagami. There wasn't a trace of bile or sarcasm to his words. He was, as ever, just sharing his impressions with me.

"Not *fair*?" I repeated. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you don't understand, then, well, there's your answer right there," Sagami pompously replied, dodging my question in the process. That oh-so-perceptive smile on his face was really getting under my skin. Actually, he was just being a plain old obnoxious, pretentious prick.

"Okay, Mister High-and-Mighty," I said, "What would *you* have done? Who would *you* have picked if you'd been in my shoes?"

"Me? I suppose...hmm," said Sagami. I was more than a little curious what someone like *him* would do if four girls ended up fighting over him.

"I'd start by dropping a save, I suppose."

"Friggin' figures!"

I found myself wishing from the bottom of my heart that Sagami would

decide to dive headfirst into the world of video games, shove his head through a computer monitor, and electrocute himself to death in the process.

My conversation with Sagami had reminded me of something: Chifuyu really *was* an elementary schooler. I mean, okay, it's not like I'd forgotten the fact that she was a grade schooler in a literal sense! It's just that it had totally slipped my mind that she *wasn't*, in fact, a formal member of our literary club.

This kinda goes without saying, but Chifuyu wasn't a student at our high school. She was the niece of the literary club's advisor (who also happened to be my homeroom teacher), Satomi Shiharu, and she had started coming by to hang out with our club as a result. From *our* perspective, Chifuyu was unmistakably a member of our club, not to mention an irreplaceable friend and a comrade in arms who shared our deepest secret, but our perspectives were very much not reflective of how the rest of the world saw things. On paper, Chifuyu wasn't part of the literary club at all. That was the plain and simple truth, and was also one thing that our god-tier supernatural powers had no hope of changing.

Of course, that's not to say we really *needed* to change it. Chifuyu's formal status hadn't caused us any problems up to that point, and none of us had paid it any mind in particular. Now, however, Himeki Chifuyu had been chosen to play the lead role in our play for the cultural festival—well, she had *volunteered* to play the part, really. How would *that* go over with the administration? The way I saw it, it seemed plausible that somebody in a position of authority wouldn't take kindly to an outsider having such a prominent place in a high school festival's program...

"No, that shouldn't be an issue at all."

...but when I posed the question to Kudou, the head of the student council, she replied with an air of casual indifference.

It was the afternoon of the same day that Sagami and I had had our chat. Before I headed to our club room, I'd decided to climb up to the fifth floor and pay the student council room a visit so I could ask if it would be all right for a student from another school—moreover, a student from a local elementary

school—to be part of our play’s main cast. We’d already started our preparations for the play, so if she *did* tell me that it was an issue, it probably would’ve turned into a major pain in the neck, but it still seemed like we’d be better off checking in advance. It also probably would’ve made more sense to check with the head of the cultural festival’s management committee, but since we were already acquainted with Kudou, I figured she’d be a better bet.

“Really?” I asked. “You don’t think anyone would care if we give Chifuyu a leading role?”

“Really. I can’t give you any sort of *official* approval, but I don’t think anyone would bother turning something like that into a major issue,” Kudou replied. She sounded a little exasperated about having to explain this to me at all.

“Plenty of outsiders will be attending the festival anyway. We’ll have parents, kids from the local middle school, and even some grade schoolers. Why would anyone raise a fuss about one of those outsiders getting involved with one of our clubs’—*ahem*—‘improvisational theater performances’?”

Hmm! Now there’s an idea, actually. If anyone seemed like they were *going* to complain about Chifuyu’s involvement, we could always claim that our whole performance was improv from the get-go, and that Chifuyu had just happened to join in on that particular day. I could tell that Kudou was the student council president for a very good reason. She was, surprisingly, just as good at bending the rules as she was at preserving them. I was already impressed, but she wasn’t quite done yet.

“Also,” Kudou said, “while it would probably be an issue if the drama club were to bring in a student from another school to star in their play, *they’re* putting on a full-scale performance in the gymnasium. The literary club, however, is a four-person organization performing a skit in the music room. Even if you bring in an elementary schooler to play another role, nobody, well...”

“Yeah, right,” I sighed. I got what she was trying to say, and the part that she’d left *unsaid* was honestly kind of depressing.

To put it bluntly: nobody would care one way or the other. It felt like a matter of grave importance to *us*, but it was *our* event, and to an outsider, our play

probably wouldn't be worth making a big deal out of no matter what we did.

"So basically, you're saying you'll look the other way?" I asked.

"That's right," said Kudou. "Like I said, I can't give you any formal backing or permission, but I don't see any reason to tell you *not* to go through with it either. I won't support you or oppose you. From my perspective as the student council president, the literary club's performance is a nonissue."

"Understood. Thanks," I said. As I turned to leave, though, Kudou spoke up once more.

"However," she said, "my position aside, I do have a few thoughts to share from my *personal* perspective."

"Huh...?"

"For one thing, I believe that it's only reasonable for a cultural festival's events to be put on exclusively by students from the school in question. More importantly, however, I believe that in the case of events put on by clubs, it's only natural to show the eldest students—the third-years—a certain degree of deference."

I looked up with a start as the meaning of Kudou's words sank in. Kudou, meanwhile, carried on.

"I'm not saying that you should *always* give third-years their way just because they're your seniors, of course. I'm a firm believer in judging one's club members by virtue of merit, whether in the case of athletics or artistic activities. In *your* case, however, I think it would have been reasonable to give your resident third-year, Miss Takanashi, the opportunity to play the leading role. Does that seem reasonable to you?"

I didn't reply, and Kudou shrugged. "Of course, if she didn't *want* the role, then that's an entirely different story."

The story wasn't different at all. Sayumi *had* wanted the role, and she had made her interest clear. I just hadn't chosen her.

That's right—it totally slipped my mind. This is going to be Sayumi's last cultural festival as a high schooler. It's her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to

participate in one of these festivals as a senior student.

Maybe as the younger students in our club—as her juniors—we really *should* have shown her some degree of deference. Considering how she'd always made bringing our club together her top priority, and the fact that she had proactively asked for the role of Juliet, maybe the right thing for us to have done as her clubmates was to let her be the star. That hadn't crossed my mind at all, though, and instead...

"I-It's not *that* big a deal! Don't look so sad," Kudou frantically protested as I sunk into a brooding silence. "Umm, I mean... S-Sorry! I wasn't trying to call you out, exactly!"

"No...it's fine. You're completely right, after all," I replied.

"Th-That's not... Look, the way I lectured you just now was sort of in bad faith, if I'm being totally honest. I'm sure you all talked this through and came to a decision together, and it wasn't my place to second-guess that," said Kudou. She sounded genuinely sorry for what she'd said. "I just, umm... I've been so busy with all this cultural festival stuff lately. Then the other day I saw how much fun all of you literary club people have been having, and I ended up feeling so jealous I couldn't stop myself from looking for something to hassle you about. I'm sorry, honestly."

Kudou had shrunk back into her seat as she apologized profusely, and I was so taken aback I didn't know what to say. She was *jealous*. I'd never imagined that she could possibly feel that way about us. "I can see you're all enjoying yourselves to the fullest, as always" was what she'd said when she came to visit us. I understood now that she hadn't meant it sarcastically after all. She hadn't been being mean—she'd been being honest, pure and simple.

"Hey, um, Kudou?" I said as a thought struck me. "Have you used your power lately?"

"Huh...?" Kudou blinked. "My power...? No, not at all. Actually, how could I? I can't use my power on its own—that's just not how it works."

She was right. Kudou's power was purposeless in isolation. She couldn't use it on her own...which meant that she couldn't play around with it on her own either.

“Okay, then,” I said. “Since I’m here and all, how about we take the chance to use our powers to the fullest? You know—just like we do in the literary club.”

I turned my gaze inward, asking the deepest reaches of my being: *Can I do this?*

My heart was full of fear and apprehension. I knew very well that if I were to bring my power to bear, here and now...there was a real chance that I would surpass the limits of my flesh. If I used my power more than a set number of times in a single day...nothing in particular would happen. Furthermore, using an incomplete technique could place a burden on my body too great for me to bear...which didn’t really matter, since this wasn’t one of those.

Still, though, using *Dark and Dark* here and now would be, well...honestly, considering the current climate, it’d be pretty rough. The student council room’s air conditioner was off, and the prospect of using my power for the first time in quite a while already had me breaking out into a nervous, excited cold sweat. *Ugh, no way—I can’t! If I use my power now, I’ll end up soaked to the skin! And I still have to go to our club meeting after this!*

Nevertheless, I couldn’t stop. I *had* to use my power, for Kudou’s sake. *Hang in there, O body of mine! The time has come to invoke Dark and Dark...with a full three times your usual intensity!*

“I am he...who *conquers chaos*,” I recited as I held my right arm aloft, the words slipping past my lips like a verse from the world’s most exquisite work of poetry. Those were the keywords that would unlock my power—the malediction that served as its trigger.

Once, when I recited the Malediction in front of Kudou, I was so nervous I completely flubbed the whole thing. Today, I would make up for that mistake! *Peel your eyes and bear witness, Kudou! Watch as for the first time in a very, very long while, I recite the Malediction in full!*

“O purgatorial flame that sways upon the brink of the Abyss, O twisted blaze of sable darkness, blighted crimson of deepest—”

“Yoink.”

“—niaaugh?!” I yelped as Kudou stole my power halfway through my invocation and I lost my balance, tumbling to the ground in a heap. “N-No, Kudou, *no*! That was too soon! You jumped the gun! I wasn’t finished reciting my Malediction!” I sputtered.

“Huh? O-Oh, really?” said Kudou. “But...you’re the one who said that I could steal your power, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but you have to *time* it right! I hadn’t even activated my power yet!”

“No, you definitely had. There were little black wisps coming out of your arm, so I’m sure of it.”

“That’s not... That’s not!” I shouted, unable to come up with a decent objection.

Strictly speaking, she was right. I really had started my power up halfway through the Malediction, out of necessity. My goal had been to make it look like my power was gradually seeping out from within me over the course of my incantation, so I’d just *barely* put out a tiny quantity of flame early, carefully reining it in so it set the stage but didn’t go overboard. It took a *ton* of effort, but I’d been planning to keep my flames carefully regulated until I was finished reciting, at which point I would’ve let them explode out in a blaze of blackest night! I guess you could say that I’d been trying to build up the scene’s tension to enhance that final moment of catharsis...but apparently, Kudou wasn’t familiar with the unspoken rules of supernatural battles.

“What exactly is the point of that ‘Malediction,’ anyway?” asked Kudou.

“Heh... Well, to put it simply, you might say it’s the key that allows me to unlock my power’s potential,” I explained. “By reciting its fateful verse, a doorway deep within me is unsealed, allowing me to borrow but a fraction of the dark, monstrous power that slumbers in the depths of my heart. Without reciting the Malediction of Unleashing, I am unable to invoke *Dark and Dark’s* power.”

“Huh? That’s not true,” said Kudou. “You used it without reciting anything back when we met for the first time.”

“...”

“More precisely, you *started* to recite something, stumbled over your own words, shouted ‘Malediction canceled,’ *then* used it.”

Please—if you’re going to call me out like this, at least don’t look so disinterested when you do it. I’m begging you here. “W-Well, an *ordinary* person would *never* be able to pull that off,” I said. “I’m the only one out there who could get away with a Maledictionless invocation. It’d be downright impossible for your run-of-the-mill human, but *I*, having received the baptism of the elder gods themselves, am able to do so without falling victim to the terrible price that awaits those who do away with it carelessly.”

“Oh, really? When I stole your power, I could use it without reciting *any* sort of—”

“Right! Yes! *Exactly!* That’s what makes you so incredible, Kudou! What *are* you?! What sort of peerless being am I in the presence of?! I’ve gotta say, I’m so proud to go to a school that has someone like *you* as its student council president!” I babbled. I’m not really sure how to put this, but it sorta felt like the longer I kept talking, the more I was tightening a noose around my own neck. *I can’t deal with this! People who take everything you throw at them totally seriously are impossible, I swear!*

“Hmm,” said Kudou. “I can’t say I’m following all of this...but if it’s possible for you to use your power without reciting anything, then why bother at all?”

“Right. Yeah. Good point,” I said. She was just acting so *normal* about all this that I couldn’t muster up the willpower to object.

Anyway, I decided to take a moment to collect myself then start the whole thing over. I had Kudou give me my power back, then held my arm aloft once more.

“Dark and Dark!”

With those exultant words, my right arm was wreathed in a cloak of black flame! Darker than the dead of night, blazing more furiously than primordial chaos itself, my flames flickered in the air as if dancing in anticipation of the world’s end. *Hella cool. My Dark and Dark is, and will forever be, hella cool!*

Hella cool indeed, but...also, well...muggy. It would’ve been one thing if it

were a dry heat, but the fact that it was more of a tepid, lukewarm sort of deal made it almost exquisitely uncomfortable. I was starting to suspect that my black flames were less a sign of the world's end, and more a sign of the hot, humid, thoroughly unpleasant Japanese summer. That said, I couldn't let that discomfort show in front of Kudou, so I endured the sweat dripping from every pore of my body and waited for her to steal my power away from me!

"..."

"..."

"..."

"So, can I steal it now?"

"Ah... Yeah. Go ahead."

Oh my god, I can't even with this! First she jumps the gun and ruins everything, and now she takes way too long to go for it?! Kudou, please, you're killing me! Don't ask for permission! Just take it, and make it look cool!

"Okay then. Here goes," said Kudou.

"Agh!" I grunted. "N-No! Dooon't!"

"Huh? What, should I stop?"

"No, no, *no*! You just don't get it, Kudou... It's okay—you can keep going!"

"But you literally just said stop, didn't you?"

"That was...just an act, I guess you could say? Like, if I don't at least make it *look* like I'm putting up a fight, the whole thing'll look super lame. It'd feel like I was disrespecting *Dark and Dark* too... Oh, and while we're at it, it'd be really nice if you, like, *said* something when you steal it? Like, it'd mean a lot to me if you shouted your power's name the moment you—"

"Oh, for the— Can we please just get this over with?!" Kudou shouted. She'd finally snapped, and she invoked *Grateful Robber* without bothering to fulfill a single one of my requests. Just like that, my black flames leaped from my right arm to hers.

"Hmm. It's been a while since I've felt this black fire of yours," Kudou said as

she gazed at the flames that flickered away on her arm. “I think the last time I stole your power was, what, six months ago...? And, that’s about all I have to say on the matter.”

“Whaaat?! Come on!” I whined. “You’ve gotta have *something* else to say about it!”

“I really don’t. Nothing’s coming to mind at all.”

“Try harder!”

“Okay, umm... Your power...wait, what was it called again?”

“Mwa ha ha... An important question indeed! I have the strangest feeling I’ve said it repeatedly throughout this exchange, but very well—I shall say it once more. The name of my accursed power is none other than...*Dark and Dark!*”

“*Dark and Dark...*? That’s... How should I put it...? Gibberish. It makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. What on earth were you *trying* to say when you named it that, Andou?”

I took a deep breath. “Sorry, but please. Just... Just stop asking me these questions. Accept that it’s just one of those things and let it slide, that’s all I ask.”

While I gave the most earnest apology I could muster, something strange happened to Kudou, who had yet to snuff out *Dark and Dark*: beads of sweat began to drip down her forehead and cheeks.

“S-So, Andou,” she said. “Th-This is actually quite hot... Well, make that *sort of* hot. It’s unpleasant in a way I can’t quite put my finger on... U-Ugh, and it’s getting grosser by the second... Why is this so *irritating*?”

“Okay, another request: please don’t say that my power’s gross, or irritating, or whatever. That actually really hurts.”

“I don’t remember it being this bad the last time I used it...”

“It’s a seasonal thing, yeah,” I said, thoroughly dejected. At that point, though...

“Heh... Ha ha! Ha ha ha ha!”

...Kudou broke out into a fit of laughter.

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha! Honestly...your power’s just so *worthless*! It’s not even close to hot enough to use as a weapon, but it *is* hot enough to make the person using it uncomfortable? How is it even possible for a power to be that stupid?”

“P-Please stop laughing,” I moaned, but Kudou just kept at it, cackling hysterically like my power was the funniest joke in the world.

Kudou returned *Dark and Dark* to me and I left the student council room, only to find Sayumi standing right outside.

“Good day to you, Andou,” she said.

“Sayumi! What’re you doing here?” I asked.

“I’m here for the same reason you are, presumably: to report to Miss Kudou regarding Chifuyu’s involvement in our play...and to check up on her, while I was at it.”

A moment of silence passed, and Sayumi shrugged. “Of course, I gather you’ve beaten me to the punch on both counts,” she added. “It seems to me that you’ve given her the perfect opportunity to take her mind off her work.”

“That wasn’t really what I was going for,” I said. “I just thought it’d be fun to do some *Dark and Dark* NTR role-playing again, that’s all.”

“Ever the modest one,” Sayumi said with a snicker, then she glanced at the student council room’s door. “Organizing this cultural festival will be Kudou’s final duty as the president of the student council. I imagine that’s why she’s applied herself to the task so thoroughly...and I must say, I was a little worried about her.”

Once the cultural festival comes to a close, the third-year members of the student council would be stepping down from their positions. Come October, an election would be held to determine their replacements. In other words, the festival represented the conclusion to Kudou’s yearlong stint as the council’s president. It wasn’t hard to imagine why she’d throw herself into the job considering that. This was her last festival—her last year in high school—and

she wanted to make the most of it.

“Umm...Sayumi?” I said. We’d been walking toward our clubroom, but now, I stopped in my tracks. “Did you want to play Juliet?”

“Well...that was abrupt. Where is this coming from?” Sayumi replied.

“I, umm, well...”

“I suppose Kudou said something to you?” she added. The look in her eyes was so piercing that I found myself at a loss for a reply. After a moment, though, Sayumi let out a quick sigh and smiled once more. “I realize now that I put you in a difficult position yesterday, and I apologize for that. I’m afraid I let my competitive side get the better of me.”

“...”

“I understand perfectly well that choosing Chifuyu was an act of kindness on your part. Please, don’t worry about it.”

“Sayumi...”

“Moreover, truth be told, I wasn’t especially attached to playing Juliet in the first place,” Sayumi added. “I just...”

“Just what?”

“...Never mind.” Sayumi said, her smile growing a touch strained. She turned to look me square in the eye. “Let’s strive to make this cultural festival one to remember. I’m very excited to see how you’ll portray Romeo on the stage.”

Sayumi’s smile carried a sense of graceful maturity, and the sight of her standing there, backlit by the setting sun, was as picturesque as could be.

Scene 5. Taming of the Crew

Before I knew it, we had less than a month left before the cultural festival. A skit that wouldn't even last twenty minutes might not *sound* like much to prepare for, but we were total amateurs when it came to theater, and if we wanted to put together a performance that was actually worth putting on in front of an audience, we had our work cut out for us. It wouldn't be much of an exaggeration to say that we had literally no time to waste.

Ever since the day we assigned our roles in the play, we'd been working at a fever pitch to get all of our preparations finished. Our cast list, incidentally, ended up looking like this:

Romeo — Andou Jurai

Juliet — Himeki Chifuyu

Laurence (a friar who helps bring Romeo and Juliet together) — Kanzaki Tomoyo

Rosaline (the girl Romeo's crushing on at the start of the play) — Kushikawa Hatoko

Narration, direction, and general management — Takanashi Sayumi

It, uh...*sorta* felt like we'd ended up shoving all of the troublesome responsibilities off on Sayumi, and I felt pretty bad about that, but there was just no way we could've gotten the play ready in time without taking advantage of her hypercompetence.

There were plenty of other backstage tasks that needed handling as well, of course—writing the script, building a stage, making props and costumes, and on and on—all of which we'd have to get done on our own. That, plus the fact that we all had to contribute to our classes' projects as well, meant that we of the literary club found ourselves in an exhaustingly busy period the likes of which we'd never seen. Each day was more hectic than the last, and it felt like I had so much work to do it might just kill me...but at the same time, I found myself

having a blast.

Anyway, here's a short-form list of some of the events that occurred over the course of our preparation period!

Event 1: Completing the Script

After some discussion, we decided that Tomoyo would write the script single-handedly. It was a pretty big responsibility to leave to just one person, but scriptwriting's one of those things where you're better off having as few people do the work as possible. Too many cooks in the kitchen and all that—adding more people in just didn't make the process any more efficient. The process we settled on was to have Tomoyo, who had volunteered to take on the job, write the first draft, after which we could all get together and tweak it as needed.

"S-So, what do you think?" Tomoyo said, fidgeting restlessly as we paged through the finished script. "Don't hold back, okay? If there's anything you don't like, just come out and say it!"

"Honestly... I think it's great," I said after I finished my read-through.

Tomoyo's face lit up in a flash. "R-Really?!"

"Yeah. You put it all together really nicely, in my book. The cuts you made make total sense, it's paced well, and you got all the important scenes in too. I'd say you struck a really good balance with it. Right, Sayumi?"

"Yes, I would say so," Sayumi agreed. "You've done a very good job of compensating for our lack of actors, in particular. We won't be able to feature a number of characters from the original play, but I see you took care to reassign their lines to other characters or make up for their absence using narration. I believe it will be very easy for our audience to follow the story using this script."

"Yeah. You're amazing, Tomoyo," said Chifuyu. Even our main heroine was satisfied with Tomoyo's work. "You put in the smooch and the happy ending too," she added.

We had indeed decided to go with Chifuyu's suggestion for the play's final twist. Juliet would awaken Romeo with a kiss, and that miracle would move their families so profoundly they'd put an end to their age-old conflict. And so,

Romeo and Juliet would live happily ever after. It was a little contrived, sure, but it was the happy ending that Chifuyu had wanted.

Tomoyo sighed with relief. “Oh, good,” she said, looking both reassured and overjoyed that we’d appreciated her work.

“Yeah, I’d say the script’s great overall,” I said. “But, well...”

“Yes, *that*,” said Sayumi. We glanced at each other, unsure of how to broach the subject.

“Huh...? Wh-What?” said Tomoyo. “Is something wrong with it?”

“Nah, I wouldn’t say it’s *wrong*, but... It’s about this part.”

I pointed out a portion of the script—specifically, Romeo and Tybalt’s fight scene. Tybalt is one of the Capulets, Juliet’s cousin. He ends up killing Romeo’s best friend, Mercutio, and Romeo kills him in turn to take revenge, resulting in his exile.

In a split second, Romeo dashes across the cobblestone street. He flies through the battlefield with the force and grace of a raging gale, leaving a flash of light in his wake. He draws the sword at his waist and slashes faster than the eye can follow, striking toward the head of his best friend’s killer, Tybalt.

In a split second, Tybalt raises his own sword and intercepts Romeo’s strike. A sharp clash rings out and a shower of sparks flies as, in a split second that feels like an eternity, their blades lock together. The two men bring all their might, all their heroic strength, to bear, and their swords creak ominously under the pressure...until, in a split second, Tybalt shifts his guard and sends Romeo’s blade flashing past him.

As Romeo stumbles, Tybalt thrusts toward his foe with an elegant flourish, hoping to deal the killing blow...but in a split second, Romeo manifests a superhuman burst of strength and leaps upward, evading the attack with an aerial dodge. He spins in the air at an incredible speed, using the centrifugal force he builds up to whip his sword forward as he descends in a slash powerful enough to topple any foe.

Romeo’s sword plunges toward Tybalt’s neck like the plummeting blade of a

guillotine, but in a split second—

“Splitting an awful lot of seconds, aren’t we?” I commented.

Tomoyo stared blankly at me. “Huh? W-Wait, really? I didn’t use it *that* much, did I?”

“You totally did. There’s literally at least one split second in every paragraph.”

“Hey, Juu,” said Hatoko, “what’s the big deal about the phrase ‘split second,’ anyway?”

If I had to explain what made the split second so special, I’d probably start by struggling with some philosophical explanation—like how you could relate the concept to the kshana, that being what Buddhist philosophy identifies as the smallest possible measurement of time—but really, none of that would get to the core of the matter. There was just something about the phrase that tickled my chuuni soul like nothing else—there was no real way to explain what gave it such depths of chuuni power, but it was a thing, and it was a *cool* thing. *Split seconds: hella cool.*

“I mean, I guess in a literal sense, it’s no different from ‘in an instant’ or ‘right away’ or whatever,” I admitted.

In novels—particularly light novels in the supernatural battle genre—I’d observed a tendency for authors to use the “split second” phrasing when they wanted something a little cooler than your boilerplate “right away.” And it worked, in my book! It really *did* sound super cool, and I could understand the impulse to put it in as often as possible...but Tomoyo’s script just used it *so* often, you’d think there’d been a blowout clearance sale on split seconds while she was putting her lexicon together.

“The overuse of ‘split second’ caught my attention as well, yes...but what I intended to point out was that the whole description of the battle is excessively dense and detailed,” Sayumi sighed. Tomoyo immediately broke eye contact. “The rest of the script is written in a clear and concise style, as one would expect from stage directions, but the prose of the battle sequence alone is almost stunningly purple.”

“O-Okay, so I might’ve gotten in a groove when I wrote that part and got a bit carried away,” Tomoyo stammered.

“And moreover, the phrasing you used—Romeo ‘flies’ across the street, blades flash, sparks fly—is straight out of a battle manga.”

“Y-Yeah, see, a bit carried away...”

“I seriously doubt that Andou would be capable of pulling any of these superhuman stunts off,” Sayumi concluded.

“Now, wait just a minute—I can’t let *that* one slide, Sayumi!” I cut in. “People had already started calling me a master swordsman when I was barely a toddler! You can’t seriously think that moves like *those* would be any trouble for—”

“Oh, so you *can* do them? How impressive. In that case, I’m sure you wouldn’t mind sparring with me for a—”

“Never mind. I was wrong, and I’m sorry. Please, *anything* but that!”

“...Surely bowing down to me is going just a *little* further than necessary?”

In the end, the whole ten-page-long epic battle sequence that Tomoyo had written in a fit of inspiration was replaced with a couple sentences’ worth of narration.

Event 2: Learning How to Act (Prelude)

I had thought that the first step in learning how to play our roles would be to read from the script...but it turned out I was totally wrong and we’d be starting with vocal exercises instead. Being our manager, Sayumi stepped up to lead our acting drills, and I was surprised to find just how authentic the lessons she taught us were.

“Daaang,” I muttered under my breath as I looked out across the seating in front of me. We were in a massive theater, big enough to rival Japan’s largest concert stadiums, and as I stepped up onto the stage, I couldn’t help but let out a gasp of astonishment. “Good thing we have *World Create* on our side. No way we’d be able to practice in a place like *this* otherwise!”

The theater was hundreds of times larger than the music room we'd be staging our actual performance in. It almost felt like a waste to use so grand a venue for vocal training, but at the very least, I was going to practice for all I was worth while we were there.

"All right, everyone, let's begin," said Sayumi. She had us line up in a row, facing the nonexistent audience, and speak up as loudly as we could. We started simply, just humming "Aaah" in a constant drone, then moved on to a drill in which we enunciated basic vowel sounds in sequence as clearly as we could possibly manage. Sayumi then gave each of us advice and guidance—and she judged me particularly harshly on account of my playing the leading role.

"Once more, Andou," said Sayumi.

"Ah, ee, oo, eh, oh, ah, oh!"

"Once more, please. This time, try to focus on projecting your voice, and speak from your core, not your throat. Try to focus on...let's see...a member of the audience in the second-floor seats, all the way in the back. Focus on that seat, and speak in a manner that its occupant will be able to hear."

"Ah! Ee! Oo! Eh! Oh! Ah! Oh!"

"You're still speaking from the throat, I'm afraid."

"What, seriously...? I don't even get what that *means*," I sighed. I'd run smack-dab into a wall that I hadn't even considered could be an issue, and it was doing some real damage to my motivation.

I'd *never* understood the whole "speak from your core" thing. My music teacher had said it over and over back when we were practicing singing in a choir in middle school, but the sensation had just never clicked with me. *How does speaking from your core even make sense? I don't have a mouth in my midsection! I'm not Bemstar, for crying out loud!*

"Well, this clearly isn't working. How can I help you understand...?" Sayumi muttered. For a moment she seemed to be at a loss, but then her face lit up and she clapped her hands. "Andou? Would you please recite your Malediction for me, in as emphatic of a tone as you can manage?"

"I am he who conquers chaos!"

“Like that!”

“Now I get it!”

And so, an unexpected wall was broken down with unexpected ease, and I never had any trouble speaking from my core ever again.

Event 3: Making Props and Setting the Stage

On account of our critical lack of personnel, we had to not only act in the play itself, but we also needed to handle all of the backstage work on our own. Worse still, we were the *literary* club, meaning that we didn’t have a stock of premade props passed down from previous generations or anything like that. If we wanted any props or any sort of set dressings, we were going to have to make all of them ourselves.

We did have one trick up our sleeves, of course: *World Create*. Chifuyu’s ability could let her create a pro-level set with ease—no, it could let her make something even *better* than what professionals had to work with. That being said, we’d rejected that plan without even really needing to discuss it. After all, using her power to do all the work for us would’ve rendered the whole exercise pointless. It just wouldn’t have been the same if we didn’t do it from scratch. I mean, if we wanted to make the process as easy on ourselves as possible, we could’ve just *not* put on a play in the first place, right? We’d resolved to use the powers we’d awakened to for the sole purpose of having fun, so if using our powers would take the fun *out* of an exercise, it went without saying that we’d have to shelve them instead.

“I mean, okay... I’ve got a feeling we’ve used our powers to take the challenge out of stuff a few times here and there, but context matters,” I mumbled to myself as I worked on the blueprint for the balcony set we’d be building. It was *super* sloppy, as far as blueprints went, but I figured it’d be better than not having any sort of plan at all.

The balcony would be used in the scene where Romeo, having fallen in love with Juliet at first sight, seeks her out for a reunion in the Capulets’ courtyard. That, of course, was the incredibly famous “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” scene, and we wanted to make sure that the audience wouldn’t have

to use their imaginations to fill in the details for it. No, we wanted a proper set that could actually allow Juliet to be standing above me. I was in charge of all the big set design stuff, so it was up to me to figure out how we'd actually pull it off.

"Maybe we could stack up some desks or chairs or whatever and cover them up with cardboard...? Can't make it too high, though, that'd be dangerous. Maybe this would be okay...? All right!" I said as I wrapped up my blueprint then got up to show it to everyone. "Hey, Tomo—" I began, but halfway through saying her name, I noticed that Tomoyo was staring at her laptop with an *intense* look of concentration on her face, so I decided not to disturb her after all.

One of Tomoyo's responsibilities for the festival was editing our literary magazine. Our main event was the play, of course, but we would only be able to perform it *maybe* three or four times a day. People would likely end up dropping in on us in between performances, so we'd decided to put together a display in the music room as well.

The display would feature copies of the magazines that previous generations of the literary club had left behind for us, as well as an all-new magazine that we'd make ourselves. That new issue's contents: the script for our version of *Romeo and Juliet*, in full. Since Tomoyo had written said script, it had naturally fallen to her to handle editing it for print.

"Hmm... Maybe I really *should* cut back on the 'split seconds'...? But then again, it gives *such* a good sense of speed that I really wanna preserve... Ugh, this is impossible!" Tomoyo muttered to herself.

Wow... What an unbelievably pointless thing to rack your mind over. You could've just omitted that whole fight scene, you know? And, like, do you even need a "sense of speed" in a script's stage directions?

Anyway, Tomoyo wasn't exactly in an approachable frame of mind, so instead I headed over to Hatoko and Sayumi, who were responsible for our costumes and props. We'd borrowed everything that we could possibly get away with from the drama club, but unfortunately, none of their spare costumes were the right size for the two leading roles, Romeo and Juliet. Chifuyu was too little,

needless to say, and the only costume that would've worked for my role was too big. Costumes for male roles in plays, it seemed, were generally made under the assumption that the actor wearing them would be tall.

We couldn't exactly go hemming a costume that belonged to another club, so in the end, we decided to just make those two costumes from scratch. At the moment, Hatoko and Sayumi were hard at work putting together Romeo's outfit, hand sewing the shirt's golden buttons and big, exaggerated collar.

"Oh, wooow! I had a feeling you'd be good at this, Sayumi," Hatoko cooed.

"Your work is very impressive as well," Sayumi replied.

"All right, then, let's make it a contest! I'll show you how well I can *really* sew!"

"He he he! All right, then. If it's a contest you want, it's a contest you'll get."

Silent sparks flew between the pair of expert seamstresses. Driven by what I could only assume was some sort of competitive rivalry, the two of them put the costume together at an incredible pace.

Maaan. Yeah, it'd be pretty tough to strike up a conversation with those two too. Maybe I should just get to work making the balcony on my own? I thought, but no sooner had the idea crossed my mind than Chifuyu plodded over to me. Her job, incidentally, was...well, whatever we could find to ask her for, basically. She'd help us out with our tasks on occasion, and she'd serve as our soothing mascot character the rest of the time. Not the most glamorous role, but *somebody* had to do it.

"Hatoko, Sayumi, you're amazing," Chifuyu said as she watched them work.

"I know, right?" I agreed. "Have you ever done any sewing, Chifuyu? Did they teach a class on it in school or anything?"

"I made a dishcloth in home ec class a little while ago."

"A dishcloth, huh? How'd that turn out?"

"Cookie said that needles are too dangerous, so she made mine for me."

"Well, somebody's overprotective!"

Chifuyu didn't really react to my outburst, and she just kept watching Hatoko and Sayumi work. "They're trying really hard," she muttered under her breath. "...Trying really hard to show off their housewifeyness."

Suddenly, Hatoko and Sayumi—who had been sewing at such a fever pitch you'd think they were racing against time to reattach a patient's severed arm—stopped dead in their tracks.

"I don't think this is really about housewifeyness this time, Chifuyu," I said. "They're just working hard because they want the costumes for the play to turn out well, that's all!"

"Is it?"

"Yeah, probably."

"I thought they were working hard because they were making *your* clothes."

A pair of shrieks rang out as two members of our club just about jumped out of their skins, jabbing themselves with their needles in the process.

Event 4: Learning How to Act (Laurence)

For better or for worse, Friar Laurence was a character whom you couldn't get away with leaving out of the story of *Romeo and Juliet*. He was, after all, the character who secretly married the two of them the day after they fell in love at first sight. Laurence acts in the hopes that the marriage will help the Montague and Capulet families finally make peace, which makes him look like a pretty swell guy and all...but he's *also* the character who comes up with the whole "feeding Juliet fake poison" plan.

"So, from a certain viewpoint, it's all *his* fault that Romeo and Juliet end up dead," I said.

"Okay, but only in hindsight, right? It's not like he was *trying* to get anyone killed," Tomoyo countered.

As the cultural festival drew closer, all of us became more and more occupied with our work for our classes' projects and less capable of getting together as a full group. On that particular day, Tomoyo and I were the only ones in the club

room.

“I mean, I know it wasn’t malicious on his part or anything, but, like...that’s exactly what makes it so sad, isn’t it? He thought he was doing what was best for Romeo and Juliet, but it ended up backfiring so badly that it got them killed instead.” I paused for a moment and sighed. “Honestly, I empathize with the guy way more than I do with the actual romance-for-brains protagonists.”

“Well, start empathizing with Romeo already! You’re *playing* him, remember? I’ve got empathizing with Laurence under control,” said Tomoyo as she spread her arms, showing off the nun’s habit she was wearing. That was one of the costumes we’d borrowed from the drama club, which explained why it looked pretty darn authentic.

“How’s it fit, by the way?” I asked.

“Just fine. Pretty much perfectly, actually,” said Tomoyo.

“Well, that’s good. I think changing Laurence from a friar to a nun was the right call for sure. Even if we’d found a friar’s outfit, I’m positive it would’ve been too big for you.”

“Not to mention that I’d rather not cross-dress in the first place,” Tomoyo said with a sigh, then she went back to inspecting her nun costume.

We had indeed decided to make Laurence into a nun instead of a friar, on account of our cast’s skewed gender ratio. *I guess that would make him Sister Laurence, really?*

“Anyway, I’m kinda surprised you’re so okay with this,” I said.

“Huh? With what?” asked Tomoyo.

“I mean, this whole costume thing’s kinda like cosplaying, right? I figured you’d be super embarrassed about it. I mean, remember when you ended up wearing that bikini armor, and—”

“A nun’s habit and bikini armor are *totally* different! Also, never bring that up again!” Tomoyo shouted as her face flushed red. She paused to take a deep breath. “Wearing a habit’s not an issue for me. It’s not like it’s super revealing or anything.”

“Yeah, I mean, that was probably the whole goal of their design, right? Forget showing skin—they don’t even show *hair*!” I said while I gave Tomoyo’s outfit another look over. She was wearing the full set: a veil on her head, a crucifix necklace, and a dress that totally covered her from the neck down.

“Wh-What?” said Tomoyo. “Q-Quit staring at me like that...”

“Oh, sorry. Wasn’t even thinking. Guess you kinda took my breath away,” I admitted.

“*H-Huuuh?!* ” Tomoyo gasped as the flush returned to her cheeks with a vengeance. “Wh-What the *hell* are you talking about?! You— I mean— *Huh? D-* Don’t tell me you, like...have a *thing* for nuns, or something?!”

“Well, yeah, I guess. I’m pretty into them, gotta admit.”

Tomoyo let out another choking gasp. “O-Okay, wow. Yeah, that one’s pretty out there... Umm, well... I-If, I mean... If you’re th-that into it, then I guess...I don’t mind if you look a little more,” she muttered so quietly I wouldn’t have been able to make out most of it even if I *had* been paying attention, fidgeting restlessly all the while. The fact of the matter, though, is that I wasn’t listening at all.

Yeah, habits really are awesome. After all... “They’re so loose and flowy, you could *totally* hide all sorts of weapons under them! Seriously, they’re just the best!”

“...”

“I mean, talk about cool, right? Who even *knows* how many implements of war you could have in there! I mean, it’s a total classic, right? If a priest or a nun shows up, then there just *has* to be a bit where they pull out a gun or a sword or whatever from under their robes! What could possibly be cooler than someone who’s pledged themselves to God secretly being a master of the killing arts on the side?!”

“...”

“Common sense to assume stuff hidden under loose clothes!”

“...”

“H-Hey, uh...Tomoyo? Isn’t this supposed to be the part where you tell me to get real? Did the Feitan quote go over your head, or something?”

“Would you *please* just shut *up*, you *dumbass*?!”

I had no clue why Tomoyo snapped so violently, but in any case, she took her costume off, and that was the end of that.

Event 5: Learning How to Act (Juliet)

If I’m going to be completely honest, I had plenty of doubts regarding Chifuyu playing a leading role. Would she be able to memorize her lines? Would she be able to, y’know, *act*? Would one of her whims kick in and make her decide that she didn’t actually want the part after all? I had so many worries I could barely count them...but, as it turned out, all of them were totally groundless.

When the time came for us to start our acting practice, Chifuyu buckled down and took it as seriously as I’d ever seen her take anything. She memorized her lines without issue, and she did her best to polish her acting skills as well. She wasn’t *astonishingly* good or anything, but the effort she was putting into it was very clear to me. You could tell just by looking at her copy of the script—its pages were worn and creased from her repeated read-throughs, and she’d written all sorts of notes about how to act out certain scenes in red pen in the margins. Supposedly, she was even practicing with Kuki at her elementary school when she had the time.

“You’re really putting your all into this, huh, Chifuyu?” I said.

“Yeah,” Chifuyu replied. “My friends at school said they’d come see the play.”

“Oh, gotcha! Yeah, guess you *have* to do your best, then.”

“Also...”

“Yeah?”

“I have to work hard because you chose me,” she asserted. She looked me straight in the eye as she said it, and it was so adorably precious of her I almost couldn’t stand it.

Anyway, Chifuyu’s Juliet act improved slowly but surely, day by day...with just

one teeny, tiny little exception. That being...

“Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I’ll no longer be Chifuyu—”

“Cut! Chifuyu...” I sighed. “You said your real name again.”

“Ah,” Chifuyu grunted, her eyes widening just a little as she realized her mistake. That was the single worry that remained regarding Himeki Chifuyu’s capability to play the leading role: whether or not she’d slip out of character and act like herself.

“It feels like the second you let your guard down, you end up forgetting that you’re supposed to be Juliet, not yourself,” I said.

“But...I am myself,” Chifuyu replied, her shoulders slumping dejectedly.

“I think you’re just gonna have to force yourself to break the habit,” I said. “Let’s try this: from now on, try to act at least a *little* Juliet-ish even when you’re not practicing, okay?”

“Do I have to?” Chifuyu droned.

“It’s the best way to make sure you don’t slip up during an actual performance,” I replied.

“Mnh... Okay,” Chifuyu reluctantly agreed.

A few days later, I would come to profoundly regret making that suggestion. It was the moment I got an up-close-and-personal taste of how terrifyingly capable Chifuyu could be when she gave something her all.

“...All right, that’s a wrap! You nailed that scene, Chifuyu—nice work!”

“Oh, did I truly? Why, I’m *ever* so flattered, Andou! Tee hee!”

“...”

“And oh, what a splendid day it is today! Why, just look at Mister Sun, shining his best high up in the sky! And oh, look, Andou! A flock of little *birds* is flying by! *Hello*, birdies! How are *you* doing this fair afternoon?”

“...”

“Tee hee! You know, I have the strangest feeling that something just *wonderful* is going to happen today! In fact, I think that this just might be the

day I meet my very own *Prince Charming!*”

“...For the love of god, bring back the old Chifuyu!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

What the hell is this princess affectation she’s got going on?! Actually, scratch that—what the hell is this Disney princess affect she’s got going on?! “Mister Sun,” seriously?! She sounds like she might break out in song at any second!

Holy crap, this is messing with my head—I can’t even tell who’s saying what anymore! For a second, I thought some completely new character had shown up in the scene and started talking without any preamble!

I’d had my suspicions before that moment, but now I was certain: Chifuyu was, on a fundamental level, *extremely* capable. She was moody, capricious, and barely ever showed motivation for much of anything, which made it easy to *assume* she was helpless...but when her motivation *did* kick into high gear, she displayed incredible depths of talent in all sorts of different fields.

Chifuyu’s normal speech pattern was very distinctive, but apparently, it wasn’t like she *had* to talk in that manner. Rather, it seemed that talking like a normal person was just too much effort for her to bother with most of the time, even though she *was* perfectly capable of it in a pinch. In retrospect, she’d talked relatively normally when she was trying to use Squirrely as a ventriloquist dummy too. I had a feeling that she could have an incredibly bright future in the arts someday, but for now...for now...

“U-Ugaaah! I can’t take this! I just can’t! This isn’t *you*, Chifuyu! This is all *wrong*! You were never meant to italicize so many of your words! Go back to saying as little as possible and making fun of me in flawless deadpan, *please!*” I wailed, falling to my knees...and then, a moment later, I felt Chifuyu pat me on the head.

“Don’t cry, Andou,” she said. Her eyes were sleepily half closed. She spoke in a dull, listless monotone. The way she talked made it feel like she was looking down on me, even though I was several years her senior. The look on her face seemed totally impossible to read at first glance...yet somehow, astonishingly, it was as clear as day once you got to know her.

There. That’s her. That’s the character I’ve come to know!

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m me.”

“I... I...”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Ch-Ch-Chifuyuuu! You came baaaaack!”

And so, the joy of our reunion left me bawling my eyes out in the arms of a little girl.

Event 6: Learning How to Act (Rosaline)

As I previously mentioned, with our classes’ projects keeping us busy, there were fewer and fewer opportunities for all five of us to get together as the cultural festival drew ever closer. One day, Hatoko and I ended up being the only members who showed up in the club room. We decided to take the opportunity to do a read-through of our parts in the script and practice our acting—though really, since Hatoko was playing Rosaline and barely had any lines, it was more like *I* was practicing and she was just along for the ride.

We decided to take a break eventually, and I found myself idly flipping through the script. “You know, I was pretty shocked when I learned that this whole play takes place over the course of five days,” I muttered, “but I was even *more* surprised when I learned that Romeo’s into a girl *other* than Juliet when the play starts.”

“Right? I was shocked too!” Hatoko agreed.

At the story’s outset, Romeo has feelings for a Capulet girl named Rosaline. Those feelings are entirely unrequited, though, and the cold shoulder she gives him sends Romeo into a state of anxious depression. He sneaks into one of the Capulets’ parties in order to meet with Rosaline, happens to catch a glimpse of Juliet, and falls in love at first sight.

“Man... Romeo’s kinda shallow, isn’t he?” I commented.

“Yeah,” said Hatoko. “He sure falls in and out of love easily.”

As far as I saw it, Romeo’s supposedly so head over heels in love with Rosaline that he’d sneak into his family’s sworn enemy’s party just to meet her, only to

immediately have a change of heart and fall for some other girl he just met instead. I couldn't exactly call it *cheating*, but it certainly seemed unfaithful of him, at the very least.

"And after he falls for Juliet, he literally never even *thinks* about Rosaline again," I added.

"He gets over her in the blink of an eye, yup," said Hatoko.

As a result, Rosaline doesn't make any appearances in particular past that point. Some performances apparently cut her out entirely, leaving her as a character that gets referenced but is never seen. She was a character recognized worldwide as the sort of heroine that has so little impact on the story, she might as well have not even been there at all.

"Actually, Hatoko, while we're on the subject—why *did* you ask to play Rosaline?" I asked.

Rosaline had so few appearances she could be cut without harming the story in the slightest. We'd considered cutting her from our version as well, of course, but Hatoko had gone out of her way to ask to play her, and we ended up keeping her around as a result.

"Well, honestly...I *wanted* to play Juliet, but since Chifuyu ended up being her, I just thought it would be nice to play Rosaline instead," Hatoko somewhat bashfully explained. "I just wanted to play a character you'd fall in love with, that's all," she added with a smile and a faint blush.

I was struck dumb, and could feel my pulse accelerating by the second. "H-Hatoko...?" I managed to stammer.

"Huh...? Oh. U-Umm... I-I don't mean *you* you—I mean Romeo! I wanted to be a character who *Romeo* falls in love with!" Hatoko yelped, red-faced and flustered.

"Y-Yeah, I knew that, duh!" I shouted, in much the same state as she was. *Aggggh, man, that freaked me out! I seriously thought she'd just told me she loved me for a second there!*

"O-Okay, let's get back to practice, Juu!" Hatoko stammered as she fanned herself with her script. Apparently, her face was still feeling pretty overheated.

“I don’t have many lines, but *you* have a bunch of them, so we need to get in every bit of rehearsal time we can find!”

“I know, I know,” I said.

“Okay! Let’s run through the scene where Romeo’s whining about his unrequited love for Rosaline again!”

“*Again?* We’ve done that scene so many times already! I know it’s one of the only bits where Rosaline actually matters, but can’t we practice the other parts at least a—”

“Trust me, it’ll be fine! I have a feeling you don’t *quite* have that scene down yet,” Hatoko said, her tone firm and insistent, then turned to look right at me. “Do your best to fall for me, okay, Juu?” she added with a grin. It was as calm and gentle as her usual smiles, but this time, there was a certain mischievous tinge to her expression as well—one that was very much *not* like her usual self. It was a smile that carried a warmth, a maturity, and a slight, suggestive edge.

What did I do in the face of my childhood friend displaying such unusual behavior? Break eye contact and mutter “Sure.” Frankly, it was the best I could manage.

...And, well, that’s more or less the size of it. The time we had to prepare for the festival flew by at a dizzying speed, and while I couldn’t *quite* say that everything was going perfectly smoothly, whenever we ran into a roadblock, the five of us would come together to work out a solution and move past it. There’s no “I” in “team,” as they say, and for our purposes, there was no “me” in “literary club.” We kept marching along, putting things together as well as we could manage...until we ran smack-dab into a wall at the eleventh hour.

Actually, no. It wasn’t so much a wall as it was a pit—a pit I’d been *vaguely* aware of, which I’d decided wasn’t *really* a big deal at all and which didn’t *really* need to be filled, only to be shocked when it turned out to be a full-blown pitfall that I stepped right into.

It all started three days before the cultural festival was scheduled to begin.

Scene 6. The Tragedy of Errors

“ ... ”

With three days left to go before the cultural festival, I was spending my afternoon sitting alone in the club room. I worked quietly, surrounded by the mass of props and set pieces we'd left scattered around the vicinity, as I waited for Andou, Hatoko, Sayumi, and Chifuyu to show up.

Hatoko, who was in my class, had to work on our class's contribution to the festival. The other three would be turning up eventually, but they had yet to arrive. We were supposed to do a full runthrough of the play this afternoon, so I certainly *hoped* they'd make an appearance.

In any case, doing nothing but waiting around wouldn't exactly have been productive, so I ended up working on one of our props: a mask. Specifically, it was the mask that Romeo would wear when he sneaks into the Capulets' party. Sayumi had put together a priority list for all of our props, costumes, and sets, and we'd already completed almost everything that she'd deemed essential. The fact that the mask *wasn't* finished just three days before the real deal, of course, meant that it was relatively low on our priority list. We could've gone without it and the play would've turned out just fine, really...

“What?! Of course we need the mask! Come on, guys!”

...if it weren't for Andou, who had put his foot down. In the end, we'd decided that we'd make a mask *if* we ended up having the time for it after all the *actual* essentials were wrapped up. I could understand how he felt, I guess. Across all genres and mediums, putting a mask on a character was a surefire way to make them look strong and mysterious. It was also sure to guarantee that the character would be handsome under the mask—well, Gein aside, anyway.

Incidentally, Hatoko had gotten almost as worked up as Andou during that discussion. “Oh, right! I get it, I do! Masks really *are* cool, aren't they, Juu?!” she'd shouted.

“*Hatoko!*” Andou shouted back. “We’re actually on the same page?! That almost *never* happens!”

“Characters with masks are just so cool, after all! Like Tuxedo Mask!”

“...R-Right,” Andou replied, his enthusiasm waning in a split second. As for whether or not Tuxedo Mask counts as cool in my book...all I can say is no comment.

A heavy sigh slipped past my lips. The hazy, frustrated feelings within me had forced their way out in spite of myself. It wasn’t that I was upset about the mask not turning out how I wanted it to or anything like that. No, the source of my gloom was...well, I mean, honestly...it was Andou.

“All that, and then *nothing*,” I sighed.

A whole month had passed since the day we went to the summer festival together, and in that time, nothing about our relationship had changed whatsoever. Things were *shockingly* normal between us. I’d been convinced that revealing how we’d met in the eighth grade would mean a massive, seismic shift in our relationship...but unfortunately, nothing of the sort had occurred.

Ever since then, we hadn’t said so much as a single word to each other about our first meeting. Andou hadn’t brought it up, and I sure as hell wasn’t about to touch on the subject myself if he didn’t make the first move. We were also just plain busy, I guess, which probably had something to do with it. I ended up having my hands totally full with homework right after summer break had ended, and then we jumped right into preparing for the cultural festival the minute that was done. We’d both been more or less totally occupied, with almost no chances to talk in private.

“I mean, really, I have to do something, right? No way anything’s gonna change if I’m just sitting on my hands,” I told myself...but the problem was, I had no idea whatsoever what I *could* do. I had this idea in my head that I had to, like...*attract* him, somehow, but I just couldn’t quite figure out how to put that into action.

If there was one moment when I really *had* tried to put some effort in, it was when I put my name in the hat for the role of Juliet. I knew perfectly well that nominating myself like that wasn’t like me. Back in elementary school, when my

class put on a play for an arts festival, I'd turned down the role of a *tree* because I was too nervous to act onstage, for crying out loud! Asking to play the main heroine was *way* out of character for me.

To tell the truth, though? I'd never really intended on playing Juliet in the first place. I wasn't up to the task, and the role didn't suit me either. But then...then...*then*...Chifuyu just *had* to go and start talking about s-s-smooching, and stuff...and I just sort of lost myself. My hand was in the air before I even knew it.

A-And *no*, it's *not* what you think! I-It's not like I *wanted* to kiss him, or anything! And it wasn't that I *didn't* want him to kiss anyone else, even if it *was* just an act... I just, umm... R-Right! I would've felt bad about subjecting any of our club's other members to the miserable fate of having to kiss Andou, so I was *forced* to offer myself up as a sacrifice...

"..."

...is what I told myself, but honestly, making up excuses to hide my shame really didn't do much for me when I was the only one in the room. Now that I'd come to understand how I felt about Andou, I'd lost the ability to lie to myself about my feelings. I just had to admit it. I wanted...I wanted to, umm...try kissing, and stuff, with, umm...with Andou.

"Ugggaaahhh!"

Well, I admitted it, and the shame came very close to killing me on the spot. *Oh, god, I can feel myself blushing so hard right now! If only there were a hole nearby I could crawl into, or a mask I could...*

"...Oh, wait. I guess it's done?" I said, surprised by my own progress. As I sat there, silently stewing—writhing, really—in my thoughts, I'd kept my hands moving, so I had finished Romeo's mask before I knew it. "Yeah, this actually looks decent. It's pretty cool, even, for a mask made out of construction paper."

I gave the finished mask a thorough inspection. I'd made it cover the wearer's full face, per Andou's request. If I had to describe it in short, I guess I'd made it look a little like Kurei's mask in *Flame of Recca*? Anyway, I casually lifted it toward my face to try the finished product on...then froze as a thought struck me.

Wait...Andou's going to wear this thing soon, right? So then, if I wear it before him...in a certain sense, wouldn't that be something kinda adjacent to an indirect kiss...?

Nope. Nooope nope nope nope, this is stupid. Why would that be the first thing that pops into my head? What am I, delusional? It'd be one thing if we were drinking from the same bottle, but a mask? Really? God, I can't stand how easily my mind's been going to that sort of place lately...

I should just put the stupid mask on and get it over with. That's the ticket—the longer I spend obsessing over it, the stupider it'll make me feel! Not that there's any need to force myself to wear it, I guess, but after making this big of a deal out of it not putting it on, it would almost feel like the more obsessive option and be even more humiliating. Oh, but when I think about how Andou's going to wear it in just a little while...wait, no, don't think about it! Stop that! I swear to god, brain, if you make this weird one more time I'm going to—

"Oh, hey! The mask's done!"

"Gaaaaaaaaaah!"

The very *instant* I held the mask up to my face, a voice rang out behind me. My heart leaped into my throat, and I shrieked like a banshee.

"Wh-Whoa, what the heck, Tomoyo? Since when did putting a mask on make you scream your head off? It's not like it's made out of stone, or anything!"

"A-A-Andou... How long have you been here?" I stammered.

"Just got here," said Andou. "Why, what's up? Something happen?"

"N-No, nothing! Nothing at all!" *Ahh... That scared the crap out of me!* I seriously thought I was gonna have a heart attack, and for that matter, my heart was *still* pounding like crazy. I did my best to steady my pulse as Andou held a hand out toward me.

"It's done, right? Lemme see!" he said. I handed him the mask without saying a word, and he put it on and turned to the mirror right away. "Oooh, *dang!* This is so friggin' cool! Thanks, Tomoyo!"

Andou was overjoyed, and seeing him put on the mask that I'd been wearing

just a moment ago without so much as a hint of hesitation left me feeling, well...a little conflicted, I guess. I would've been devastated if he'd *refused* to wear it, but the fact that he hadn't paid it the slightest thought was, well... You know, it just *was*. Like, come on, it's an indirect kiss! Or at least an indirect cheek rub!

"Hey, Tomoyo, pass Catastrophe over to me, would you?" said Andou. Once again, I silently picked up Romeo's sword—which we'd made out of cardboard and aluminum foil—and handed it over to him.

After everything we'd been through, nobody had even batted an eyelash when Andou had named his handmade prop weapon. I *did* have to admit that Catastrophe was a pretty good name for a sword, actually. Not only did it conjure an image of death and destruction, it also hit close enough to "tragedy" to call to mind the inevitable conclusion of plays and novels that fell into that category, making it a very good fit for our situation in particular...and, by the way, part of me was seriously unhappy about how easy it had become for me to follow his train of logic when it came to this sort of stuff.

"I knew I could count on you for this, Tomoyo! The design's seriously spot-on," Andou said with a grin after spending a while posing with the mask and sword.

"All in a day's work," I replied.

"All right! Guess I'd better break it now."

"But *why*?!" I yelped. That one had come from so far out of left field I just *couldn't* let it slide without comment.

"Huh? I mean, masks look way cooler when they're half broken, right?" said Andou. "That way they make you look like you've fought your way through countless battles, emerging victorious each time! Oh, and it makes you look sorta like an Arrancar too."

"I'm not gonna say I *don't* get it, but don't go breaking our props just to make them look a little cooler! What kind of Romeo shows up to the party with a half-shattered mask on?!"

"Romeo's *definitely* one of those mask-wearing final bosses, for sure. You

know, the sort where the protagonist's party manages to pull off a combo attack on him, finally breaking the mask and revealing that he was the main character's relative or best friend or whatever all along? Then after that huge plot twist, he withdraws to fight another day...and heads straight for the Capulets' party!"

"*Romeo and Juliet* does *not* need an overblown RPG side story!"

"Anyway, I was just kidding about breaking it in the first place. I wouldn't damage something you made for me, and it's easily cool enough as is! Seriously, I can't get enough of this thing," Andou said as he gazed at the mask, totally enraptured. Seeing how happy he was with it made all the effort I'd put into making it feel worthwhile. "By the way, is it just you here so far?" he added.

"Yeah," I said with a nod. "I think everyone else'll be here before too long, though."

"Makes sense. We're supposed to do a full-on dress rehearsal today, after all! All the props, all the costumes, everything—just like the real deal!"

"That's right. Feels like we've come a long way, doesn't it?" I said. We were a bunch of total amateurs trying to build a show from the ground up, and I'd been pretty worried when we were first getting started, but it seemed we'd most likely finish in time for the festival after all. "Your Romeo's been getting pretty sharp lately too," I added.

I wasn't trying to butter him up with that last part—I really meant it. Andou was, surprisingly, a pretty good actor. I mean that in the "pretty good for an amateur" sense, of course, but he'd really been getting into character and playing his part with impressive aplomb.

"Mwa ha ha!" Andou chuckled. "Such a feat is but child's play for I, the man once known for miles around as the Lord of the Ever-Shifting Countenance! Thanks to my own lack of distinguishing form or features, I have the power to embody anyone and everyone I see fit, granting me the tools I need to become a legendary assassin! Yes, indeed—I am no one, and thusly, I can be *anyone*!"

"Yeah, okay, I get it now. Considering you're so used to inventing personas to put on cringey little fantasy skits at the drop of a hat, playing an *established* character from an actual play must be no problem."

“Hey! I don’t *invent personas*, okay?!” Andou protested. He was taking the jab pretty personally, but, again, it’s not like I couldn’t understand why. After all, I’d been there myself.

In a sense, telling a raging chuuni that their playacting was just them putting on a persona was a violation of the gravest of taboos. When you’re that deep in your own narrative, dedicated to convincing yourself that you’re someone truly special and doing your best to act accordingly, the fact that all you’re *really* doing is constructing a deliberate persona is something you can’t let yourself acknowledge under any circumstances. It becomes vitally important to make it seem like your whole shtick is, in fact, just how you naturally conduct yourself. When I was in middle school... Actually, no, let’s *not* think about that after all. Yup. Moving along.

“A-Anyway,” Andou continued, “you’re acting like all that’s beneath you, but doesn’t *everyone* put on a persona pretty much all the time? I mean, look at *you*! Your whole demeanor changes in a bunch of subtle ways when you’re in class compared to when you’re with us.”

“That’s... I mean, that’s totally different from *inventing* a persona,” I said, but even as the words left my mouth, part of me was starting to wonder if it really *was* all that different after all.

Depending on who I talked to, I’d totally change the subjects I brought up and the tone I spoke in. I’d read the room and adapt accordingly, putting on a front and keeping my true feelings in check, being careful to think about how the people around me would take everything I said. I think everyone does all that stuff, to a greater or lesser extent, and if you wanted to sum it up in a single phrase, “putting on a persona” fit the bill pretty nicely.

“I mean, okay, you have a point,” I admitted. “When you’re around people you don’t know super well, I guess there *is* sort of an urge to keep the impression you give them in check. Like, what’s a good example...? Okay, so when you’re tweeting or putting up a blog post, don’t you sometimes think, ‘Wait, is saying something like *that* out of character for me?’ It happens almost unconsciously, but it’s still there in the back of your mind, right?”

Even when you’re talking to people you can’t see online, it’s easy to fixate on

your own persona. All the more so when you're talking with a real, live human being.

"You know, the more I think about it, the weirder it seems. Why do we get so obsessed with our own personas?" I mused. It wasn't like we spent our day-to-day lives acting, after all. We'd be ourselves whether we made an effort or not, so what was the point?

"Huh? There's nothing weird about that at all," Andou said without missing a beat. "Everyone has an idea or two about how they want the people around them to see them, right?"

Suddenly, everything sort of just clicked together. *Oh, I get it now. I guess it is pretty straightforward—we put on personas because we care about what other people think of us. We want to know how they see us, and we want to influence that perception for the better. We construct our personas in an effort to make people see us in a certain way, or not see us in a certain way. When all's said and done, we're defined by the personas—the characters—that we build up and act out throughout our interactions with others.*

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," said Andou, reiterating the words of Shakespeare that he'd already quoted some time beforehand. "Now, this is just how I see things," he continued, "but I think what Shakespeare was trying to say was that everyone's constantly putting on an act of sorts, with the people around them being their audience. But, like, that's *just* my interpretation," Andou added, doubling down on the uncertainty.

He didn't seem particularly convinced by his own logic, possibly on account of the fact that he didn't actually know crap about Shakespeare. Of course, I didn't know crap about Shakespeare either, so deciding whether or not his interpretation was valid was totally beyond me. What I *could* say for sure was that I thought it was a pretty interesting take.

"I guess if you're right about that...then being a total poser, saying everything in as over the top of a manner as you can, and putting on a super self-indulgent persona probably counts as normal too," I said. "Everyone wants to look cool in front of their own personal audience, after all."

In some cases, the desire to become something and the desire to be *perceived*

as something are probably one and the same. Take people who want to be rich, for instance—in a lot of cases, that desire could just as accurately be expressed as wanting people to *believe* that they're rich. Then there's the case of people who want to be hot—wouldn't it be just as true to say they want people to *see* them as hot? Or, to take the logic to a bit of an extreme, people who want to know how to play the guitar. In some cases, doesn't it seem possible that they just want to be *seen as* a person who can play the guitar? And then there are people who don't want to learn about Shakespeare for the fun of it, but rather because they want to come across as someone who's well versed in Shakespeare's works.

When I really thought about it, a certain *someone's* constant outbursts were, in a sense, expressions of a perfectly ordinary desire that all humans had. Everyone puts on a persona. Everyone wants the people around them to see them in a certain way. Everyone wants to bring the *them* that other people perceive closer to a certain ideal through whatever means they can. And that being the case...then maybe sufferers of the affliction known as chuunibyou were nothing more than individuals who'd taken that impulse far past its logical extreme—people who went beyond simple exaggerations and pretenses and crossed over into the realm of fiction as they searched for the pieces to construct their persona from.

I took a moment to pause and collect myself. I could only look back on that sort of thing objectively because I'd been through and gotten over my own chuuni phase. When I'd been in the thick of it, I'd wanted to be *perceived* as cool just as much as I'd wanted to actually *be* cool. That's why I'd gone out of my way to turn up the cringe around other people—because I'd been under the terrible misapprehension that it would make them think that I was some sort of badass.

Even as I'd fallen into the delusion that being different from everyone else made me cool, that desire to be cool was, in and of itself, founded upon a desire for the very same people I'd tried to distance myself from to see me that way. I'd considered being misunderstood to be a badge of honor, but at the same time, I'd wanted to be understood in equal measure. It was yet another unresolvable paradox.

Maybe, when all is said and done, chuunibyou is nothing more than the result of losing your way on the path to growing up and learning to build the persona you use when you interact with the rest of society. Maybe chuunis are just people who've taken a slight misstep and wound up learning a very different sort of lesson instead.

“Hey, Andou,” I said, unable to resist asking a question that sprang to mind. *How will a current chuunibyou sufferer respond?* “Do you want to be cool? Or do you want people to see you as cool?”

“Hmm, good question. I think...” Andou said, then paused for a few seconds to consider the question.

“I want my name to spread as far and wide as the vilest criminal the world has ever seen, making people all over the world despise me and curse my very existence, only in *truth*, there's actually some crazy set of extenuating circumstances, and the people who understand those circumstances decide to join up with me and fight by my side while the villagers in the towns I saved long ago worship me as a hero and a savior. Basically, I want to be cool in the sort of way where the whole world hates me, except for the certain very small percentage of people who think I'm cool as hell.”

“That's the *least* cool answer you could've possibly come up with!”



Hatoko arrived at the club room eventually, and she, Tomoyo, and I decided to get the props and costumes ready for our dress rehearsal while we waited for our last two members to show up.

“Hey, Juu,” said Hatoko, “we're waiting until the real deal to stick the cardboard onto the balcony, right?”

“Yeah, exactly,” I replied. “We won't be able to take it apart to carry it after the cardboard's on, so we should leave it for now. We can finish it tomorrow after we bring everything into the music room.”

“Okay!” Hatoko said, then she left the balcony in the corner of the room and moved on to work on another prop. “We're all wearing our costumes and running through the whole play, just like the real thing, right? Ahh—I'm starting

to get a little nervous...”

“C’mon, why get nervous *now*? This is still just practice!” I sighed.

“B-But *still*!”

“Y’know what they say you should do to deal with stage fright? First, you use your finger to write the character for ‘person’ in your palm...”

“Oh! Oh, I know this one! Then you—”

“...then you *crush* it!”

“Or maybe I don’t know it after all!”

“And through that act of senseless brutality, you abandon your humanity and transform into a cold-blooded, merciless killing machine!”

“Th-That’s terrifying, Juu! Why would you *want* that?! Just swallow it! That’s what most people do!”

“Okay, but really think about it, Hatoko: isn’t *swallowing* a tiny person even freakier than crushing them?”

“That’s... Actually, that’s true!” said Hatoko, her eyes wide with shock.

The old “write the character for person in your hand and swallow it to cure your stage fright” routine had been around since pretty much forever, but thinking about it divorced from that context, it struck me as being *really* darn weird. I mean, that’s just straight-up cannibalism, right? People don’t power up by eating other people, assuming they aren’t ghouls!

Just as I decided to ask Sayumi where that old ritual came from, Tomoyo, who’d been working on getting the costumes ready, spoke up. “Now that I think about it, are we still going with *Romeo and Juliet* for the play’s title?”

“Huh?” I grunted. “What sort of question is that? Does the play have some other name, or what?”

“Not what I meant. We made a ton of cuts and tweaked the story a lot, right? So I thought it might be a good idea for us to tweak the title too, just to let the audience know what they’re in for.”

Hmm. Actually, she has a point. It might be easier for the audience to accept

all the liberties we took if we warn them in advance. “So you’re saying we should call it, like, *Romeo and Juliet: The New Testament*, or something?”

“Right, exactly.”

“Hmm. What could we go with, though?” I mused. Actually using “The New Testament” felt like it could come across as a little pretentious, and it wouldn’t tell the audience anything in particular about the play we’d be putting on. On the other hand, *Romeo and Juliet: Happy Ending Edition* would spoil the whole shebang. “What would get across the core of our version of the story...? Our big thing’s Chifuyu’s twist where a kiss brings Romeo back to life, right? If we wanna work that in, we could—”

“H-How about we *don’t* work that in, actually?” said Tomoyo. “It’s, y’know...pretty embarrassing, and all.”

“Oh...right. Fair enough,” I said.

Tomoyo and I fell into an awkward silence. Then Hatoko piped up and said, “Oh, right... Juu and Chifuyu are finally gonna kiss soon,” making things even *more* awkward than ever.

The thing about the kiss scene—the scene that was causing all this discomfort—is that, in truth, we’d barely practiced it at all. We’d more or less said “We’ll make sure the audience can’t see what’s happening and fake it somehow” and left it at that. Today, however, was our dress rehearsal, and that meant we might finally have to do a proper runthrough of that whole sequence.

Right, yeah. That’s true. I will have to act out a kiss scene with Chifuyu...

“Wh-What’re you blushing for, Andou?!” Tomoyo shouted.

“I-I’m *not*, so nothing!”

“Hmph! You’re such a loser. Who gets that worked up about one little fake kiss? Ugh, seriously, this is why I can’t stand teenage boys!” Tomoyo grumbled, though it didn’t escape my notice that her face was easily as red as mine—no, probably even redder. She was, after all, a teenage girl herself.

“What’s there to get worked up about?” I sighed. “She’s an *elementary schooler*, for crying out loud! Of course I wouldn’t.”

“Oh, really?” Hatoko asked, sounding a little pouty. “But Juu, *you* chose Chifuyu, didn’t you? And you chose her over Tomoyo, Sayumi, and me!”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“*Right?*” said Tomoyo, jumping on the bandwagon. “You *knew* there was going to be a kiss scene, and you picked Chifuyu—an *elementary schooler*—anyway! What gives?”

Suddenly, I was fighting a two-front battle. There was a faintly mean-spirited look in their eyes, and the way they were teasing me felt very pointed. I couldn’t tell if they were just in the mood to mess with me or if they were venting their frustrations at not being chosen to play the leading role.

“Oh, right,” said Tomoyo. “While we’re on the subject, remember back when you had that one *awesome* title? What was it—the Lolicon Knight?”

“Oooh, right, that *did* happen! That was the perfect title for him!” said Hatoko.

“Give me a break, please,” I moaned. Now that they’d dragged the Kuki incident into the picture, all I could do was throw up my hands and beg them to stop.

“I’m *not* a lolicon, for the record! I just picked Chifuyu through process of elimination, that’s all!” I insisted, using a slightly stronger tone than I’d usually resort to. I needed all this speculation about me being into little girls cleared away as soon as possible, after all. “I’d *never* have feelings for an elementary schooler, no matter *what*, trust me!”

That was it. That was the moment—the moment I threw out that casual, haphazard declaration.

I heard a crash from the corner of the room, and turned around to find that part of the balcony set had collapsed. We’d put it together out of chairs and desks, and since we were due to take it apart and move it to the music room the very next day, we’d only done the bare minimum to keep the pieces attached to each other. The slightest shock was enough to break it apart. And there, standing in the wreckage of the crumbled balcony...

“Ch-Chifuyu...?”

...was our very own Juliet.

For a moment she just stood there silently, not moving an inch, but then she walked straight toward me. I do mean *straight* toward me too, ignoring everything in her path—the fallen desks, the props scattered across the floor, all of it...not to mention Tomoyo and Hatoko, who'd rushed over to make sure she wasn't hurt. She just walked right up to me, then came to a stop.

"Chifuyu... Are you, umm, okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine," Chifuyu muttered indifferently as she stared at the ground.

"So, like... How long were you over there?"

"The whole time. I got here early, and I was napping."

At that moment, I remembered how Chifuyu had explained that lately, she'd been into deliberately napping in cramped, uncomfortable places. She'd arrived early—even earlier than Tomoyo, most likely—then crawled into the balcony set and fallen asleep. And we, having never realized that she was there...

"Andou," Chifuyu muttered, eyes still glued to the floor and voice slightly quavering. "I...was really happy when you picked me to be Juliet. I thought you wanted me to play her. That's why I worked so hard. I worked...so hard..."

Chifuyu's gaze stayed fixed downward. She was avoiding eye contact at all costs, and as she spoke, her shoulders began to tremble.

"Did you pick me...by process of elimination?"

"Th-That's not what I—"

"Andou...you'd never have feelings for an elementary schooler?"

"..."

"You're not a lolicon?"

I let out a strangled gasp as my words caught in my throat. I had no idea what to say—no idea what sort of answer I could give her. I *wasn't* a lolicon. I didn't have the slightest hint of a lolita complex. I wasn't interested in elementary schoolers in *any* sort of sexual light, nor a romantic one. And so needless to say, as far as Chifuyu was concerned...

“...I’m done,” Chifuyu muttered. Maybe she was indignant that I hadn’t managed to muster up any sort of excuse or apology? One way or another, she turned her back to me and walked away, quickly using her power to bring a Gate into existence before her. She was planning on jumping away to who even knew where.

“W-Wait! Wait a second, Chifuyu!” I shouted as I frantically reached out for her—but then she turned to look at me, and her expression made me flinch back again.

Chifuyu...was *mad*. Even as tears pooled in her eyes, she shot me an intense, furious glare. Her cheeks were flushed red, and her every gesture exuded a sense of pure rage. I’d never, *ever* seen Chifuyu look that purely, unambiguously angry before.

“I hate you, Andou!”

And with that parting scream, Chifuyu vanished.

Scene 7. throh-THEH-law

Two days passed by, and the weekend arrived. Under normal circumstances, the school would be abandoned on Saturdays, but this being the day before the cultural festival began, the halls were packed with students who were working away to finish off their projects and run through rehearsals. We of the literary club were no exception, arriving at school the same time we would on a weekday to move all of our props and set pieces over to the music room.

Thanks to some help from the cultural festival's organizational committee, we managed to get everything carted over before lunchtime. Our *original* plan had been to use the afternoon to stage a final rehearsal in the same location we'd be putting on our actual performance in, double-checking that everything would work out as anticipated, but that plan had been abruptly put on ice, on account of the fact that our Juliet was AWOL.

"Well, this certainly leaves us in a predicament," said Sayumi, her expression grim.

We'd returned to the club room for our lunch break. Now that all of the materials for the play had been relocated, the room felt more spacious than it had in weeks, but that did little to dispel the aura of gloom that hung over us. Nobody had much of an appetite, and our food remained by and large untouched. As to what had us in such a subdued state of mind...well, I think that probably goes without saying.

"I'm sorry. This is all my fault," I muttered.

"N-No, it isn't," said Tomoyo. "None of this would've happened if I hadn't gone overboard teasing you like that."

"That wasn't just you, though," Hatoko said with a shake of her head. "I just couldn't stop myself from bullying Juu a little, and it all went wrong."

"No... This really is my fault," I insisted. "If it weren't for me, Chifuyu would still be—"

“I don’t believe that arguing over who can claim responsibility for this issue is going to accomplish anything productive,” said Sayumi. The three of us second-years had been stewing in regret for two days now, and our president had finally decided to put her foot down and drag us out of our funk. “This isn’t exclusively any one person’s fault. All of us are responsible—me included.”

“But, wait... You didn’t do anything wrong at all,” I said.

“I’m afraid that’s not true, Andou. I do indeed share responsibility for this predicament. Forcing you to choose who would play Juliet unilaterally was, clearly, a mistake,” said Sayumi. “You selected Chifuyu for the role in an effort to ensure that no one’s feelings would be hurt, and I approved of that decision, believing it to be the most amicable way of settling the matter. In retrospect, I was viewing things in far too optimistic of a light.”

Sayumi sounded deeply remorseful, and the look in her eyes told me that she was feeling the same sort of regret that I was. I’d thought that this was the choice that would hurt the fewest feelings. Chifuyu would be happy about getting to play Juliet, and since she was a grade schooler, everyone else would be able to accept the outcome without feeling any real hostility or jealousy. I figured it was the best possible choice—a choice that would leave no one unhappy.

What the hell was I thinking? “Leave no one unhappy”? As if! “The best possible choice,” my ass!

The answer to “What was I thinking?” was obvious, really: I’d been thinking about myself and no one else. The only reason I’d chosen to muddy the waters was because I didn’t want anyone to get mad at me. Sure, it’d *looked* like I’d had their best interests at heart on a superficial level, but the truth was that I hadn’t really been considerate toward any of them at all. I’d been so focused on acting like a big, mature adult and so set on avoiding any and all drama that I’d lost sight of what was actually important.

The truth was that, without ever meaning to and without realizing what I’d even been doing...I’d used Chifuyu. I’d been so terrified of making an actual, intentional choice that instead, I’d exploited her presence in the equation, deceiving her and toying with her young, innocent heart in the process. The fact

that I hadn't done it on purpose didn't make it any better. If anything, it made it *worse*. I hadn't resolved myself to see the deception through or to make sure it never got out, and when it'd done just that, Chifuyu had been hurt as a result.

"What'll we do if Chifuyu doesn't come tomorrow? We can't do the play without her, can we...?" Hatoko somewhat anxiously muttered.

Tomoyo, who was sitting beside her, turned to Sayumi. "Hypothetically, if she really *doesn't* show up...what *will* we do? What'll happen to all our plans?"

"It's far too late for us to cancel the play entirely, so we'll have no choice but to have someone fill in as her understudy," Sayumi explained. "That said, there's nowhere near enough time for someone who hasn't participated in our rehearsals to memorize our script and stage directions, so one of us will have to assume the role. I believe the most realistic solution would be to cut Rosaline, who has the fewest appearances out of all the characters we've included. That would leave Hatoko free to take over my narration duties, and I in turn could play the role of Juliet. Considering that I am, I believe, the only one of us who has committed Juliet's lines and blocking to memory, that would likely be our best option."

Sayumi's suggestion certainly did strike me as a realistic option. She'd been acting as our director, and she had provided guidance for all of our performances. I had no doubts that she could step into the role of Juliet and play it to perfection.

"However...on a personal level, I have no intention whatsoever of serving as Chifuyu's understudy," Sayumi added, her voice clear and unwavering. "I have no desire to play the role of the main heroine as the result of an unexpected setback." She turned to me next. "As I said a moment ago, I believe that this incident is everyone's responsibility. That being said, you bear the *most* responsibility out of all of us, Andou. Your naive kindness has hurt Chifuyu, and hurt her deeply, at that," she said, judging me—condemning me—in a truly severe tone.

"Wh-Whoa, Sayumi!" said Tomoyo. "I mean, like...you don't have to say it like *that!*"

"That's right! Juu was just trying to make all of us happy," said Hatoko,

jumping to my defense as well.

Sayumi, however, was unmoved. She glared at me, the glint in her eye as pointed as ever.

“Do you understand what you did wrong, Andou?” she asked.

“Yeah...I do. I’m really sorry,” I replied, then bowed deeply in apology.

Sayumi shook her head. “Unbelievable. Clearly, you don’t understand the first thing about your own mistake. Tell me, Andou—are we the people you should be apologizing to right now?”

I gasped and looked up at her with a start.

“There’s precious little time left until tomorrow’s performance. Considering that, I believe there’s only one thing you should be doing right now. Do you follow?”

I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists. *Damn it all... Just how stupid am I?*

“If the five of us are not united in our purpose, then there’s no point in the literary club participating in the cultural festival. Wouldn’t you agree, Andou?” Sayumi said. Her voice was as severe as ever, but I knew her words were coming from a place of kindness, and they resonated with me on a deep level. I’d fallen into a pathetic, depressive state of inaction, but she hadn’t tried to console me. She’d been as strict as ever and scolded me in exactly the way I needed her to. Her harshness carried a sense of pride and dignity that healed my heart, chided me for my failures...and spurred me to action.

Thank you, Sayumi. I really am blessed to have an upperclassman like you watching over me.

“I’m stepping out for a little,” I said, then hurriedly packed up my lunch, stood up, and looked over at our club president. “Let me promise you this, Sayumi: I’m going to make your last cultural festival the best one you’ve ever been in!”

Sayumi gave me a satisfied smile. “I expect great things from you...Guiltia Sin Jurai.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“Hello hello! Shizumu of the Sagamis speaking.”

“Hey.”

“What’s going on, Andou? It’s not every day that *you* call *me*.”

“Nothing important, really.”

“If it’s not important, I really wish you wouldn’t call at all. Everyone’s pretty busy right about now, you know?”

“Wait, were you in the middle of something?”

“Hmm. Well, okay—I guess I’m not busy with anything really important either... Ah. Hey, can you give me just a second? I should put some underwear on.”

“...”

Never before had I so cursed my own powers of imagination and intuition.

“Okay, thanks for waiting! So, what’s up?”

“Do you remember what you said the other day, Sagami? About my casting choice not being fair? I want to know what you meant,” I said.

“Oh, do you? That’s certainly a belated question. Did something happen?”

I didn’t answer him. In fact, I didn’t say a word. Sagami, however, seemed to read into that fact, and he began talking as if he’d already guessed exactly what was going on.

“Now, if a man gets turned on by elementary schoolers or little girls specifically because of their age, I suppose that makes him an irredeemable degenerate. But you know, Andou...wouldn’t a man who doesn’t take elementary schoolers or little girls seriously specifically because of their age be just plain prejudiced?”

“...”

“You couldn’t choose any of the other three, but you *could* choose Chifuyu. Why? It’s simple: because you weren’t taking her seriously. Because you didn’t view her as a potential romantic partner. Because you didn’t see her as a heroine,” Sagami said indifferently. “You treated her like a little sister...or,

actually, maybe I should say you treated her like a niece? Most people would be willing to get in fights with their little sister, at least, but with a niece, that's off the table. Instead, you spoil them. You coddle them. If your niece tells you that she loves you, you say 'I love you' right back, and that's the end of it. It's as tepid as a close relationship can get."

I treated her like my niece. Something about that assertion struck me as oddly apt. The way I felt about Chifuyu was somewhat close to paternal, and somewhat close to fraternal...but at the same time, it was by no means familial. "Like a niece" summed up my feelings for her almost perfectly.

"That's the sort of presence she is in your mind, no matter how *she* might feel about it," Sagami said.

"And...that's why the choice I made wasn't fair?"

"Right. Oh, but don't get me wrong—I'm not trying to condemn you at all! When I said you weren't being fair, I didn't mean it in a bad way."

I didn't know what to say to that, and a moment later, Sagami carried on.

"Show me a guy who would treat *any* girl as a target of romantic interest, sharing his affection fairly regardless of whether or not she's underage, and I'll show you a plain old pedophile. Treating people in different ways depending on their age like you did is perfectly normal, and letting an age gap influence your relationship with someone is only appropriate. *However,*" Sagami added, "the problem in *this* particular case is that Chifuyu perceives herself as your equal. *She* isn't taking the age gap into account at all when it comes to how she treats you. It's almost like she doesn't understand it in the first place, considering how she pays no attention to seniority and gives her elders no respect or deference whatsoever. I can't say whether that's on account of her being a pure and genuine person or simply the arrogance of youth. Maybe she's just plain rude. Who knows?"

Himeki Chifuyu was fair to an extreme. Unlike me, she saw the world—and she saw *me*—through eyes untainted by bias or prejudice. That was probably why it had never crossed her mind that she might've been given preferential treatment on account of her age when she got the role of Juliet. She'd just been happy about getting the part, plain and simple. I'd realized that, on some level

—I'd just refused to acknowledge it. I'd just smiled and cheered her on, treating her with all the seriousness I'd treat a naive little girl who'd just announced that she wanted to be a Precure when she grew up. I'd made a show of partiality toward her, when in truth, I was just brushing her off.

"You made a reasonable decision based on common sense, and she was incapable of understanding it. It's pretty hard for me to say whether either of you is in the wrong, but...hmm...if I had to pick a side, I'd say I'm with Chifuyu this time. Cute little girls are always in the right, after all, and if I'm being honest, I just can't stomach how you thought you could get away with finding an option that wouldn't hurt anyone's feelings in the end," said Sagami. "This is just my opinion, of course, but when people say that they don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, that usually means that all they *really* want is for their *own* feelings to not get hurt."

"..."

"Anyway, why did you even bother calling me in the first place, Andou? You figured all this crap out on your own ages ago, didn't you?"

"No real reason. I was just killing time en route," I replied. "Also, I just felt like letting you go off on one of your rambles and getting in a terrible mood." I'd been trying to act the adult, full of myself and my own supposed maturity, and I'd hoped that Sagami would smack me back down to earth with one of his prejudiced, arbitrary, hypersubjective, and hopelessly self-indulgent personal critiques.

"I really wish you wouldn't use talking to me as a form of self-flagellation," Sagami said. He hung up soon after, which worked out well, seeing as I'd just reached my destination.

I was in a corner of a residential neighborhood, standing before a rather large house with a garden out front. The property was surrounded by a fairly tall wall, and a nameplate by the front gate had "Himeki" written on it.

I gulped. Although I hadn't used *Dark and Dark* recently, beads of sweat were still trickling down my back. This was far from the first time I'd been to Chifuyu's home, but this time, I felt like a soldier charging toward an enemy fortress with no idea what defenses lay in wait to stop me.

I kicked things off with the obvious option: walking up to the front door and pressing the doorbell. It wasn't long before I heard the distinctive sound of slipper-clad feet pattering down a staircase and approaching the door from inside. The footsteps reached the entryway, paused, and then I heard the sound of something—a chair, I assumed—getting dragged across the floor. A few seconds of silence passed before I heard the dragging sound again, followed by the footsteps retreating from the entryway once more.

“...”

Chifuyu... You're awful at pretending to not be home. Do you realize how obvious it is that you just looked out the peephole and decided to ignore me? You couldn't quite reach it on your own and had to bring a chair or something over for a boost, right?

In any case, I could feel comfortably certain that Chifuyu was, at least, home. Given that it was Saturday, I'd thought there was a chance that her family would open the door for me, but since they hadn't answered the doorbell, it seemed more likely than not that she was home alone.

“Well, what now?” I muttered to myself. I could've kept ringing the doorbell, but I knew it'd be pointless—Chifuyu would just keep pretending to be out. I knew her home phone number, but considering how she'd reacted so far, I figured she'd just hang up the instant she realized it was me. Sticking it out until her parents came home *was* an option, but it was one that I wanted to save as my absolute last resort. This was Chifuyu and my problem, and if possible, I wanted to solve it by talking things through, just the two of us...not to mention that I was *terrified* to meet her parents under our current circumstances.

“Guess that means I only have one choice.” I took a deep breath, stepped back from the door, steeled my resolve...then stepped into the garden. “Sorry for intruding,” I said under my breath.

This was straight-up trespassing now, no matter how you sliced it. If any of Chifuyu's neighbors noticed me, they'd *definitely* report me, but this was an emergency, and I didn't have the luxury of being picky about my methods. I tiptoed through the well-kept garden, making my way over to a stack of tires

piled up deep inside, from which I proceeded to clamber up and hop onto the garden wall. It was *very* narrow, and my footing was awful, but I flung out my arms and somehow managed to keep my balance.

It's fine! I'm a cat! Cats do this all the time! I told myself as I advanced along the wall. I was now *fully* visible from the street out front, and I couldn't have possibly looked like anything other than a burglar, but still I moved forward, step by wobbly step. I was walking a dangerous path in both a physical *and* social sense, but that didn't stop me. Anything to get just a little bit closer to Chifuyu's room. I knew where it was from the last time I'd been to her house: up on the second floor, by a corner, with an animal-print curtain hung up on her window.

"Heh," I chuckled to myself as I inched along. I was very aware that a guy my age using a garden wall as a balancing beam while laughing to himself would *definitely* look like a dangerous lunatic, but I just couldn't stop myself from laughing. "Feels like I've become Romeo for real this time."

Romeo fell for Juliet at first sight and sneaked into the Capulets' estate in order to see her again. Considering the state of their houses' relations, he'd literally put his life on the line to do it. If one of the Capulets had caught the only son of the Montagues skulking around their estate, there's no telling what they might've done to him. Still, though, he just couldn't keep himself away—he couldn't miss his chance to meet the girl he loved. For that, and that alone, he risked it all...

"Wait...huh? Oh, for the— *Really?*"

I somehow managed to make my way next to Chifuyu's window without falling, only to discover that the distance from the top of the wall to the first-floor roof was a lot farther than I'd initially estimated. My plan had been to jump from the wall to the roof, climb onto her balcony, then slip my way into Chifuyu's room from there, but there was just no way I could clear a distance like the one I was dealing with unless I got a running start first.

Oh, wait. Duh. The people who designed this house did that on purpose. They wouldn't have made it that easy to get into the second floor from the wall.

With plan A down the drain, all I could do was move right along to plan B. It

was most definitely *not* a plan I wanted to go with, but I'd been prepared for the worst the moment I climbed onto the wall.

“*Chifuyu!*” I shouted. It was broad daylight on a Saturday, in the middle of a residential area, but I still shouted at the top of my lungs. I used all the skills I'd mastered through our acting drills, speaking from my core and projecting my voice as far as I could make it go. “*Chifuyu! You're in there, aren't you?! Come out, please!*”

For just an instant, I caught the barest flash of movement from within the room as the animal-patterned curtains were pulled closed. Chifuyu was probably trying to make sure I wouldn't be able to see her, and she probably hadn't considered that doing so proved that she *was* in there beyond a shadow of a doubt.

I took a deep breath. “All right,” I said. “If you don't want to see me face-to-face, then you can stay inside. I'm gonna talk to you from out here, though, so please listen.”

And then...I bowed, as deeply as I could.

“I'm sorry!” I shouted. Bowing while balanced on a narrow wall was pretty darn dangerous, but I was desperate enough to go for it anyway as a gesture of my sincerity.

“I get it now. I thought that I was being considerate, but the truth is, I wasn't even thinking about you at all! I acted like I had everyone's best interests in mind, but really, I was only thinking about myself! I'm so sorry!” A painful lump was working its way up my throat, but I did my best to endure it as I confessed my sins. “The truth is...I chose you to play Juliet for *me*, not for you. I just thought that nobody would complain about it if I picked you. It wasn't about whether or not you were the right person to play her—I wasn't thinking about any of that at all. *But*, things are different now! Right now, I *do* think you're the best choice to play Juliet out of all of us!”

I wasn't trying to talk her up, and I wasn't making excuses. I really, honestly meant it.

“I've seen how hard you worked this past month. I watched you up close, every step of the way, so I know for sure now: you're our Juliet! Nobody else

could play the role like you, I'm sure of it! Our version of *Romeo and Juliet* wouldn't even *work* without you! So please..."

So far, Chifuyu hadn't offered the slightest hint of a response. I didn't stop there, though. I kept going, speaking directly from my heart.

"Please play your part, at least in tomorrow's play," I pleaded. "I get that you might not want to perform with me anymore, and that's totally fair...but still, please! I don't want everything we've done this past month to go to waste over something like *this*!"

Maybe I was making a mountain out of a molehill. The play represented a month's worth of work for us, sure, but that was the work that a bunch of amateurs could put in between their classes, which wasn't really all that much. From an outside perspective, our play would probably look like a slapdash farce that a bunch of students had thrown together in their spare time. Even so, I wanted it to be a success. I wanted it to be a real, proper *play*, one way or another. All of us had come together to make it happen, after all, and that's not even starting on the fact that this would be Sayumi's last cultural festival. And, above all else...

"You don't want your work to go to waste either, do you?! Wouldn't it be a shame to never even perform after you tried so hard? I'm sure everyone's excited to see you onstage—your friends, your parents...*everyone*! They'll all be coming to see you! Isn't that why you—"

"Nuh-uh, pal!"

An awkwardly accented voice rang out from Chifuyu's window. I'd been too focused on shouting to notice, but somewhere along the way she'd drawn back her curtains and opened the window just a little—enough for a child to pass through. There, on the edge of the balcony's wall, stood Squirrely...though strictly speaking, he wasn't standing on his own. I could see a little hand holding the stuffed animal upright from below.

Squirrely stared right at me. His stuffed-animal eyes were as adorably big and round as ever, and by all rights, it shouldn't have been possible for his expression to change, but somehow, it still felt like he was glaring at me.

"Ya don't get it! Ya don't get a gosh-darn thing, pal!" said Squirrely.

It had been quite a while since I'd gotten to witness Chifuyu's ventriloquist act, and honestly, it hadn't improved much. She was still awful at it, really, and her accent was still laughably phony...but even so, I could very clearly understand the emotion packed into her words.

"Chifuyu hasn't been workin' hard *just* 'cause her papa and mama or her friends're gonna come see her! That's true too, but it ain't the *big* reason!" Squirrely shouted. "Y'know why she *has* been workin' hard? 'Cause she was happy that *you* chose her! She even practiced at *home* 'cause she was so happy you picked her to be Juliet! She gave up *sleepin'* time to memorize that script!"

I gasped. *Chifuyu...cut back on sleep for us? But...But that would be like torture for her! She really went that far, just for our play?*

"And then *you* go talkin' 'bout all that process-of-elimination junk...? *Nuts* to that, ya big dum-dum!"

It felt like Squirrely's roaring had pierced me right through the heart. "I'm sorry," I said. I couldn't think of anything else I *could* say. I'd screwed up in a way I couldn't take back, dangling the joy of being chosen in front of a little girl's nose before pulling it away at the last second and letting her plummet into a pit of despair. Then, as I stood on the wall, unable to take action...

"Hey, you! What're you doing up there?!"

"Shaddup, kid!"

...a series of furious shouts rang out from behind me. I looked over my shoulder and found that I'd attracted the attention of a few passersby and some of Chifuyu's neighbors. They all looked *very* suspicious of me, and they were all looking right at me.

"Crap!" I yelped. I was about to leap off the wall—but before I did, I turned to face Squirrely one last time. "Look, Squirrely, I know I have no right to say this, but I want you to pass a message on to Chifuyu anyway," I said. "Tell her I'll be waiting for her tomorrow!"

Then I jumped down from the wall and hightailed it the hell out of there as fast as my legs could carry me.

Scene 8. Romeo and Juliet

The day of the cultural festival had finally arrived. The event was scheduled to open at nine in the morning, and right on the dot, a crowd of visitors made their way into Senkou High to enjoy the attractions all of our classes and clubs had prepared for them. The sports clubs had set up food stalls out front, bands started performing in the gym the second the event began, and I got the feeling that on the whole, a lot more people had shown up than last year. The efforts of the student council and the festival organizational committee seemed to have paid off.

The fifth-floor music room the literary club was occupying was no exception to the hustle and bustle. We'd only just opened our doors, yet a smattering of visitors had already begun to trickle in to see our setup. Some of them were reading the literary magazines we'd put on display on the desks, and others were looking at the set pieces we had on the stage. Some of them were also holding pamphlets for the play, which we'd left in a pile outside the room. I'd been worried about what we'd do if nobody showed up at all, so seeing people actually come in and take an interest was a relief...though the one person we wanted to turn up most of all still had yet to make an appearance.

"I see Chifuyu has yet to arrive," said Sayumi. We were in a prep room that was connected to the music room, which we'd turned into an impromptu staff area for our performance. Our first showing was scheduled to begin in thirty minutes.

"Wh-What're we gonna do?" Hatoko muttered anxiously. "We're supposed to start any minute now!"

"She's not *gonna* show up. Not after how angry we made her," said Tomoyo.

"No...there's still time," I said. "Chifuyu *will* show up. I'm positive!"

I was insistent, acting as if I were trying my hardest to drive away the doubts that might have still lingered among us, but the mood in the music preparation room remained as heavy as ever. Our performance was drawing closer and

closer, minute by minute, and it felt like we were being driven more and more into a corner...or, at least, that's the impression we were doing our best to portray.

"Y-Yeah, that's right!" said Hatoko. "I just know Chifuyu's going to make it in time! Isn't she, Juu?"

"Right? All we can do is believe in her," I agreed. "Don't you think, Sayumi?"

"Indeed. Let's have faith in Chifuyu, shall we, Tomoyo?"

"It's our only choice. Chifuyu's the only person who could possibly be our Juliet, after all. Right, Hatoko?"

We were just going around in circles at that point. Our expressions were strained and sweat was dripping down our foreheads as we did our damndest to *not* look in one specific direction. The four of us were keeping our eyes stubbornly turned away from that certain part of the room, and the cause of this strange behavior also happened to be the reason we were all so uncomfortable. The explanation behind all of it was exceedingly simple...

...it was because Chifuyu had, in fact, already arrived.

"..."

Yup. I can feel her staring at me, I swear. I couldn't turn around, though—none of us could. We *had* to act like none of us noticed her, no matter what. Chifuyu was clearly under the impression that nobody had realized she was hiding in the prep room, but, like, honestly...it was so obvious. She'd been shuffling, skulking, and sneaking about the chamber, *entirely* convinced that she was pulling the wool over our eyes as she moved from one "hiding place" to the next.

She obviously *thought* she was totally concealed, but to be brutally frank, she wasn't. Like, not at *all*. At the present moment, she'd wrapped herself up in a curtain, totally oblivious to the fact that it wasn't long enough to cover her feet. Chifuyu, it seemed, was *really* bad at hiding, and it was up to the four of us to pick up the slack in her place. As to how we'd ended up in this mildly infuriating

situation...well, we'll have to turn the clock back by about thirty minutes or so to lend context to that.

Kuki had shown up to visit us just moments after the cultural festival opened its doors. She'd explained that she'd walked here with Chifuyu and the rest of their friends, but she had claimed to need to use the restroom in order to slip away to come see us and secretly spill the beans on Chifuyu's master plan.

"Chii's planning on waiting until the very last second, then revealing herself in the nick of time. She wants to surprise all of you," Kuki explained.

Essentially, Chifuyu's goal was to make us think she *wouldn't* show up: we'd start to panic and probably consider bringing in an understudy, but of *course* we'd decide that nobody but Chifuyu could be our Juliet and ultimately choose to believe in her and wait it out; then the time for the play to begin would arrive, and Chifuyu still wouldn't have shown herself, but we'd decide to start the performance anyway, keeping faith that she'd be there in time for Juliet's entrance; then, when the time finally came and we had all but given up hope, Chifuyu would take to the stage at long last and surprise everyone.

"I'm really sorry about this. I told her how many problems she'd be causing, and I *tried* to stop her, but Chii just wouldn't listen to me. I'm so sorry, honestly! She doesn't mean anything bad by it, I swear! Please don't hold it against her," Kuki said, looking truly regretful about how things had turned out. "And, umm... This is really hard for me to ask, but...would you please pretend to be surprised? She's *really* confident that you won't find her, but knowing Chii, I bet you'll see her right away. I'm guessing she'll hide behind the curtain—she thinks nobody could *ever* find her back there. So, well...even if you *do* find her, please pretend not to notice. I'd really appreciate it!"

Yeah...okay. How should I put this? ...Yeah, what else can I say except: "What are you, her mom?!"

Kuki's overprotective maternal instincts had been running on overdrive that day, it seemed. The surprise Chifuyu was planning was as creative as it was risky, and normally, there was no way we would've been willing to play along with it without protest...but the circumstances being what they were, we'd agreed with Kuki's request immediately. Chifuyu hadn't filled her in on her

motives, apparently, but we knew exactly where this was coming from. We knew why Chifuyu didn't want to show herself until she absolutely had to.

In any case...thank goodness, honestly. The fact that Chifuyu *did* intend to play her part in the play was such incredible news that it was almost enough to move us to tears, but for the time being, we couldn't let that relief show. No, we had to do our best to pretend to be in a blind panic.

"I believe in Chifuyu. She'll make it in time. I just know it!" I said, working as much frustration and anxiety into my tone as possible as I pointedly did *not* look at the curtain. Sayumi, Tomoyo, and Hatoko all tried to do the same, looking as worried as they could. But then...

"Achoo!"

...a truly precious little sneeze rang out from behind the curtain. A deathly silence fell over the prep room, and the blood drained from our faces.

"...A-Achoo! Achfwoogh! Damnations! Oh, why must this room be so *dusty*?!"

"O-Oh, nooo, are you okay, Juu?! Here, have a tissue!"

"H-Hey, Andou, don't sneeze out of nowhere like that! You really freaked me out!"

"You should also be sure to cover your mouth when you sneeze, incidentally."

All four of us leaped into action to cover up Chifuyu's mistake, and through a brilliant show of teamwork, we somehow managed to—

"Achoo! Achoo!"

Oh my god, three times?! Chifuyu's the sort of person who doesn't just sneeze once, I guess! "Fwahaugh! Achfichoom! Ficshoom! Fiction! This story is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is purely coincidental...is what we should say when the play's over, don't you guys think?!" I wailed.

"N-Nice idea, Andou! Yeah, let's do that! Somebody might try to sue us or something if we don't!" Tomoyo shouted back.

O-Oh, god, that was so forced. It's getting harder and harder to back you up here, Chifuyu. If you don't stop sneezing now, you're gonna put us in a really

tough position! My best guess was that the corner of the room behind the curtain was *lousy* with dust. We had to find some way to prompt Chifuyu to relocate, or there was a very real possibility that we'd never escape the sneeze-induced hell we'd landed ourselves in.

I shot Sayumi a look, and she nodded back at me. "There are a few things I'd like to discuss regarding the script," she said. "Would everyone gather up around me?"

At our president's instructions, we took up our scripts and faced the room's far wall. The facing-the-wall part was a matter of necessity—we *had* to stand like that if we wanted to give Chifuyu the chance to relocate, and so it was that we became an association of strange weirdos who would inexplicably hold a heated conversation with a wall.

Thankfully, I soon heard a set of little footsteps pattering around behind us. Chifuyu, it seemed, was on the move. I let out a sigh of relief, knowing that we'd be free from the threat of a sudden sneeze throwing everything into chaos again. *Yeah, giving her the chance to move somewhere less dusty was definitely the right—*

Crash!

"..."

Gaaaaaah! She tripped over something!

"Ahhh! Ahh, ahh, ahh, ahhh! Ahh, ah, ee, oo, eh, oh, ah, oh!"

"Ooooh, you're doing vocal warm-ups, Hatoko?! Nice idea! I like that attitude!"

"Yes, indeed! Let's all join her, shall we?! We can do one last set of exercises together before our first performance!"

And so, we became an association of bizarre, disturbing freaks who did vocal exercises while facing a wall. Chifuyu *did* manage to find a new hiding place eventually, but she still managed to make several other screwups afterward that had us falling over ourselves to keep her cover plausibly intact.

"W-Well, then, I believe it's about time for us to change into our costumes,"

said Sayumi, who looked exhausted. The rest of us nodded in listless agreement, and since the girls' costumes took longer to put on, I stepped out of the preparation room to let them get changed first.

I let out a bedraggled sigh as I headed into the main music room. I was *seriously* worn out. It turned out that pretending not to see someone who was very visible was downright draining. It sort of felt like I'd already pushed my willpower and endurance to their limits before the performance had even begun, but I was in no position to whine about it. Chifuyu still hadn't forgiven me, after all, and if I wanted her to do so, I had to prove my sincerity up on the stage. I had to show her that I truly believed she deserved the role of Juliet, and I had to do it through my acting alone.

First, however, I had to step out to relieve myself...

"Oh? If it isn't Andou."

...and I happened to bump into Sagami right in front of the restrooms.

"Sagami, you're alone? Where's your girlfriend?"

"In the little girls' room. Hence why I'm on standby, for now," Sagami explained.

"Hmm," I vaguely grunted.

"And how about you?" he asked. "How's the play shaping up? Sounds like you had a few wrenches thrown into the works—did you sort those out? You should know that I've been *very* excited to see Chifuyu's Juliet. I hope I'm not going to be disappointed?"

"No worries there," I said. I stood tall and declared it with all the confidence I could, mostly to boost my own morale. "We'll put on the best production of *Romeo and Juliet* you'll ever see!"

By the time 10 a.m. rolled around—the time our play was scheduled to start—the chairs we'd set out to serve as our audience's seating had filled up nicely. I saw plenty of familiar faces among the crowd. The front row was full of kids who I assumed were Chifuyu's friends—something about them just *screamed* "elementary schoolers," and Kuki was sitting in the middle of their formation,

setting up a tripod-mounted video camera. She had the sort of fiery enthusiasm burning in her eyes that you'd expect from a mother recording her kid's very first school play. I spotted Sagami sitting with some girl I'd never seen before toward the back of the crowd, as well. *Hmm. She's pretty cute, I guess.*

"Cut that out, Andou! They're gonna see you!" Tomoyo whispered. The two of us were offstage, but our "offstage area" was nothing more than a couple dividers we'd set up to hide away the sides of the room. I was peeking out at the audience between those screens when Tomoyo gave me a poke and told me to stop.

"What? C'mon, aren't you curious? We're getting a pretty good crowd, looks like," I whispered back.

"D-Don't *tell* me that! You're gonna make me nervous..."

We'd gotten changed, and all of our preparations were in place. Hatoko and I were dressed like European nobility, Tomoyo had her nun's habit on, and all of us were on standby in the wings while we waited for our cues. Sayumi, who would be narrating, stepped up to the microphone we'd set up on the side of the stage. On the *opposite* side, I could just make out a corner of Juliet's dress peeking out from behind a pile of props. That, of course, had to be Chifuyu. We'd made sure to leave her costume in a conspicuous place after we'd finished changing, and it seemed she'd managed to find it and change into it on her own.

"The time has come for our performance to begin. We hope you enjoy the literary club's rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*," Sayumi said, then she paused for a beat before shifting into a solemn, dignified tone when she launched into the opening narration. "Our tale is set in the fourteenth century, in the Italian city of Verona. There the noble houses waged an endless feud, divided between those who swore loyalty to the emperor, and those who aligned themselves with the pope. Within all that discord, Romeo, the sole son of House Montague..."

It was time. We'd finally begun. It would've been hard to describe the play we were about to put on as well staged, to be totally honest, even if you *were* trying to be nice. Our set was handmade, and it *really* showed. We didn't have

proper curtains, a spotlight, or enough room to work with. Our whole cast and crew put together was five people strong, performing for an audience of slightly less than twenty. It was a spur of the moment play thrown together in a month for a school festival, nothing more and nothing less.

And yet...that's what made it so special for us. That's what made me so dedicated to ensuring it would *be* special—for myself, and for the girl whose feelings I'd so terribly hurt. Making her the greatest Juliet the world had ever seen was the only apology I'd managed to come up with, so I'd do it, whatever it took.

The narration came to a close. It was time for Romeo to take to the stage, and I stepped forth, my resolve unwavering.

Now—let us begin the end of the beginning!



Our play kicked off without a hitch. Andou and Hatoko's scene—the scene with Romeo and Rosaline—wrapped up, and my monologue as Sister Laurence finished soon after. We'd just made it through the scene where Romeo sneaks into the Capulets' estate to attend their ball, and as soon as it was over, I flipped the lightswitch. We'd closed all the window curtains in advance, so shutting off the lights plunged the music room into semidarkness.

Andou and Hatoko quickly shuffled their way off the stage. "Phew! Okay, gotta hurry," Hatoko said as she went off to change out of the dress that had served as her costume and into a black tracksuit. Rosaline didn't have any scenes past the end of the party, so Hatoko would be helping out backstage for the rest of the play, and she needed to dress inconspicuously to do so.

"So, Chifuyu didn't come out, huh?" I whispered.

"Yeah," Andou weakly replied.

Juliet was *supposed* to make her first appearance during the ball. Her presence in the scene wasn't major, to be fair—she's onstage for a moment, dancing off in a corner, and she doesn't have any lines. The whole point was that Romeo falls for her at first sight, so the goal was to make it come across as the most fleeting of glimpses...but in the end, Chifuyu hadn't shown up at all.

Andou managed to ad-lib his way out of it, fortunately, and the audience hadn't seemed to realize anything was off, but we certainly had.

"She didn't... But, y'know, we kinda saw that coming, didn't we?" Andou added.

"You think she's really going for it, then?"

"Yeah. I bet that Chifuyu will make her entrance in the next scene."

As Andou and I whispered to each other, Hatoko, now dressed in the all-black garb of a stagehand, passed by us and headed onto the still dark set. While Sayumi read the narration, Hatoko rapidly and silently swapped in the various props that would set the scene. Last but not least, she pulled the black sheet off our stage's largest feature, way in the back: our handmade balcony.

The next scene would be the iconic sequence in the Capulets' garden where Romeo and Juliet reunite—also known as the "Romeo, Romeo" scene. It was far and away the most famous sequence in the play, and it wouldn't work on a fundamental level without our Juliet's presence. If Chifuyu was aiming for the most impactful moment possible to reveal herself, it would *have* to be now.

"...Unable to hold back the passion brewing within him, Romeo set out to see Juliet once more, sneaking past the Capulets' guards and making his way into their estate," Sayumi narrated. At the moment she finished, I flicked the lights back on, and Andou—Romeo—took to the stage once more.

"Phew... It seems I've made it inside. So this is the Capulets' garden," he said as he glanced around. A moment later, a look of agonized longing came across his face. "Oh, Juliet! What I would do to hear your voice just once more!"

Romeo had fallen hard, and now his feelings for his new beloved were consuming him...and with that, it was finally time. Juliet's first line came next. She would poke her head out over the balcony's rail and declare her love for Romeo. This *had* to be the moment where Chifuyu would finally make her grand entrance...

"..."

...but she didn't. A full ten seconds passed with no sign of her.

No way... B-But...why?! I thought as another ten seconds ticked by with no change. That made twenty seconds of total stillness and silence onstage, and *that* meant that we officially had a problem. Andou was trying hard to keep a straight face, but I could see the tension in his expression as plain as day. He'd reached a hand upward in his throes of lovestruck agony, and he was still holding it up there, frozen solid with no clue what to do next. There was so much cold sweat dripping down his brow, I actually felt sorry for the guy.

As the silence stretched on, the audience began to stir. Our spectators looked baffled, but trust me, we were more baffled than any of them. *Wh-Why? What's going on? Was Chifuyu not aiming for this scene after all?* Another ten seconds passed by, and then...

"...Ugh! It couldn't be—the estate's guards?! Are they onto me?! I was so sure I gave them the slip!"

Sayumi barely hesitated for a moment before adapting to Andou's improvised plot twist. "What's this? It seems Romeo's plan has gone awry, and the Capulets' guards have thwarted his attempted infiltration!"

"Heh! Have it your way, then. You shall taste the steel of my beloved blade, Catastrophe!"

Andou and Sayumi worked together to ad-lib their way out of the awkward halt the play had come to. It seemed they were planning on buying time by inserting a battle with the estate's guards, which wasn't a *bad* idea, but it also wouldn't help much at all unless we could do something with the time they were buying for us. The balcony scene just couldn't happen without Juliet present.

"What are you *doing*, Chifuyu?" I muttered under my breath. She was still over on the other side of the stage, no mistaking it—I could even still see a bit of her costume poking out from the pile of props. Why else would she be there if not to wait for her cue? "So why isn't she coming out...?"

I was as confused as I'd ever been before, but Hatoko, who was right beside me, seemed to come to a realization. "O-Oh, no," she whispered as the blood drained from her face. "You don't think...she fell asleep, do you?"

I blinked. "Huh?"

“W-Well, think about it! If she really *is* over there, but isn’t coming out on her own...that’s the only explanation that makes sense, isn’t it? I’ve been watching that bit of her costume, and it hasn’t moved at *all* this whole time...”

“...”

Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?! Are you kidding me?! Asleep?! Chifuyu, are you actually asleep?! Now?! At the single worst possible moment?!

It was incredibly hard to believe...but at the same time, entirely plausible. If we were talking about anyone else, I would’ve ruled it out in a heartbeat, but, well, this was *Chifuyu*. Plus, I mean... Okay, this might come out wrong, but, like... I had a feeling that she’d been pretty worn out recently, I guess? I mean, all of *that* had happened just three days ago! She definitely hadn’t had the time to sort out her feelings yet, and I could easily imagine her having been way too worried and anxious to sleep at all the night before. That’s not even starting on how she’d had to get up early to find a hiding place then stay perfectly still and silent between finishing changing and her cue to come out onstage. Between all of that, she must’ve been so stressed and exhausted that I almost couldn’t blame her for nodding off...*almost*.

“Now, of all times? Really, Chifuyu?!” I hissed.

Meanwhile, up on the stage, Romeo’s impromptu battle scene continued to unfold. “What...?! How could this be?! There was another, *ultimate* guard pulling the strings of the Four Heavenly Guards this whole time, and now I have to fight *him* too?!” Andou shouted. I hadn’t even noticed that he’d gone off on a Four Heavenly Kings tangent, but apparently, he was already moving on to the secret bonus boss that commanded them.

“Horror of horrors,” said Sayumi. “Yet *another* powerful foe has appeared to thwart our hero, but surely, Romeo will emerge victorious. You can do it, Romeo. We believe in you, Romeo.” Her narration had devolved into the sort of material you’d hear at a shopping mall tokusatsu show for little kids, and it was becoming abundantly clear that neither of them could buy us all that much more time...especially Andou, whom I could hardly even bring myself to watch anymore.

“Hah! Hi-yah! Graaah!” Andou shouted as he shadow-fenced with a platoon

of imaginary guards. His stage fighting was, in a word...unfortunate. At this rate, our play wouldn't just be a farce, it'd be so off the rails it'd loop right back around to being a tragedy again. He *tried* to salvage the spectacle, and even threw in a cartwheel and some somersaults to spice up the choreography, but they were just...just *awful*. I actually winced so hard, I ended up closing my eyes entirely.

It felt like his slipshod performance had already lasted an eternity, and the audience had been *deathly* silent since the moment it began. They weren't even laughing at him. They just stared, taking in our lead performer's nonsensical, inexplicable pantomime with a cold disinterest in their eyes. I didn't even know how to describe the atmosphere in the room. It was just...horrid.

"W-We have to do something, Tomoyo!" Hatoko frantically whispered. "Juu looks like he's about to cry! Actually, he looks like he's about to drop dead!"

In all fairness, I would've *wanted* to drop dead if I were in his position. In fact, I think I would've bit my tongue and ended it on the spot. "Yeah, we're in it deep now," I said. "If this keeps up much longer, the whole play'll be ruined! And that's if Andou's spirit doesn't break down before then, which I really think it might."

"Wh-What'll we do?!"

"Wake Chifuyu up, to start. That's about all we *can* do."

"But how are we supposed to...? Ah!" Hatoko exclaimed. It looked like she'd finally realized that I had an ace up my sleeve: the supernatural power to bend time to my will.

"I'll be right back."

Closed Clock!

In a split second—the world came to a halt. Everyone and everything aside from me froze in place, entirely motionless.

...Ah. *I forgot to snap my fingers.*

“No, no, not the time to worry about that crap!” I jabbed at myself. Then I stepped up onto the stage without making any attempt to be stealthy about it. Our audience wouldn’t see anything that happened while time was stopped, so I was in no rush. I simply strolled over to the other side, taking care not to bump into the backdrop, balcony, or Andou, who was frozen in a sort of hysterical between-poses state. I reached the pile of props and peered behind it, where I found...

“...I knew it,” I sighed.

There she was: Chifuyu, slumbering away with the most adorably innocent expression I’d ever seen plastered across her unconscious face. She’d skillfully crammed herself into the corner, still wearing her Juliet costume, and zonked right out.

“Oh, right. Didn’t she say something about getting into sleeping in cramped places lately?” I muttered to myself. I was glad that she was *just* asleep, really—part of me had been starting to worry she’d come down with a sudden illness. In any case, I made sure I was out of sight and deactivated my power, bringing the world back into motion...and making sure to actually snap my fingers this time.

“Chifuyu! Wake up, Chifuyu!” I whispered as I shook her by the shoulder.

Chifuyu’s eyelids slowly drifted open. “Mnhh...ah. Morning, Tomoyo,” she blearily muttered.

“Morning,” I replied. “Hey, do you know where you are right now?”

“Mhh...? Ah!” Chifuyu grunted, her eyes suddenly widening with shock. “Ahh... Th-The play...”

“It’s okay! Calm down, it’s fine. The play’s not over yet. Andou’s out there working his butt off to buy us time right now,” I said as I glanced over my shoulder at the stage, where our Romeo was indeed still engaged in his endless battle. “We’re on the scene where Romeo and Juliet reunite in the courtyard, and your line’s next. Think you can handle it?”

Chifuyu hesitated...then gave me a confident nod. “Yeah,” she said. She’d only just woken up, but there was a clear glimmer of tenacious strength in her eyes.

“And hey, Chifuyu?” I said. “I let you have the main heroine role this time around...but I’m not gonna give it up next time.”

We weren’t planning on staging another play after this one, of course. For all I knew, we’d never even have a chance to fight over a leading role again. That wasn’t really what I was talking about, though, and I had a feeling that Chifuyu would understand the *actual* point I was getting at perfectly well.

Somewhere deep down, I think I’d been taking her lightly. Just like Andou and the others, at some point along the way, I’d started viewing her as not being on our level without even realizing it. I’d given her special treatment because she was an elementary schooler, and I hadn’t taken her seriously for the same reason. And, of course, I’d taken it for granted that a high schooler like Andou would never seriously fall for a little girl like her. I’d underestimated her in every way, and that, it seemed, had been a mistake.

“I won’t give up either,” said Chifuyu with her head held high and a fearless smile across her face. I couldn’t see her as anything other than a genuinely cute, pretty, and charming girl. Charming enough to surmount the age barrier and make someone fall for her on the spot, even.

“Well? Get out there, Juliet,” I said, then I gave her back a push, ushering my rival in arms onto the stage.



Ch-Ch-Ch-Chifuyuuuuuuuu! You made it! You finally, finally got up onstage! Do you have any idea how late you are and how hard I’ve been working to cover for you out here?! I thought the shame and awkwardness was going to straight up kill me! Biting my tongue off and drowning in my own blood would’ve been a thousand times better than subjecting myself to this misery, but I held on! I believed in you, and oh, thank god, I was right! You actually made it! Thank you, Chifuyuuuuuu!

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I was free from the miserable hell I’d been trapped in. I very nearly broke down in tears of relief on the spot, but I resisted the urge and spun to look up at Chifuyu on the balcony instead. She was already one hundred percent in character, her expression carrying a sense of melancholy, but an ever so faint blush staining her cheeks. It was the face of

a maiden in love if I'd ever seen one, and I had to admit that she cut a strikingly lovely figure. Sure, her costume was handmade, and her balcony had been cobbled together out of desks and cardboard. The whole stage was a half-baked shame thrown together from whatever we could get our hands on, in fact, but Chifuyu alone was the real deal.

The audience let out a collective gasp of wonder as Juliet made her long-awaited entrance. Everyone was captivated by her striking visage, and up in the front row, Kuki had pulled out a digital camera and was snapping picture after picture, even though she was already getting the whole thing on video. Finally, Chifuyu raised a hand to the sky above, as if grasping in vain for a lifeline to rid her of her anguish.

“O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?”

I was stunned. Everyone was. Chifuyu's performance stole the whole audience's breath away—especially those who knew how she acted in her day-to-day life. Chifuyu, who almost never broke out of her usual slow, droning monotone, was now speaking from her core, perfectly clearly and with impeccable enunciation. That single line alone was enough to tell everyone present just how much work she'd put in over this past month, and also just how much that work had paid off. A deep, heartfelt sense of relief came over me at the thought that all her effort hadn't been wasted after all, and I felt a flame begin to blaze within my chest as I waited for her next line...and waited. And waited.

“...”

Taking an awfully long time on that second line, aren't we? As the silence dragged on, the audience began to stir once more. Chifuyu was still just standing there with a look of hesitation and bafflement on her face, hand raised overhead, not moving a muscle. I gasped as a thought struck me: *Don't tell me she's so nervous she forgot her lines?!*

We'd screwed up, big time. It would've been so easy to conceal a copy of the script in the balcony, but we hadn't bothered. Chifuyu had done so well with her memorization during our rehearsals that we hadn't even considered the possibility that she'd blank on her lines during the real deal.

What do we do now? I was starting to freak out and started shooting the rest of our members glances, hoping *somebody* would be able to work out a contingency, but then it hit me: Chifuyu hadn't forgotten her lines after all. She waited for a moment longer, took a quick breath, then spoke on as all traces of hesitation and doubt vanished from her face.

"O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" she repeated...and then, she continued. "Wherefore art thou Romeo, and wherefore am I Juliet?"

Suddenly, I was slammed with a mixture of astonishment and utter confusion. Chifuyu had, of all things, started ad-libbing.

"Wherefore must I be so young, and you so much my elder? Wherefore must I be a child, and you an adult? Wherefore must children and grown-ups not be bound by love?"

Chifuyu spoke on. She was going *completely* off-script, but nobody made the slightest effort to intervene. The audience had no way of knowing, of course, and *we* sure as heck couldn't stop her. We couldn't do *anything*, really. Everyone present simply turned their ears to the girl on the balcony, taking in her every word with rapt attention.

"Oh, Romeo, please—cast aside your station, abandon the values expected of you! Fear not the scorn of those around you, and hold me close, with all your strength! Leave your assumptions and prejudices behind, see me for the woman I am, and pledge your love to me! Look upon *me*, not the child you believe me to be! Do this, and I swear that I shall love you in return!"

If we were playing this scene out the way it was supposed to go, it would've involved Juliet lamenting the fact that her family and her love were at odds with one another. Having fallen for the son of the Montagues, her house's sworn foes, she would rack her mind for a solution to her conflict, but she would ultimately be unable to restrain her love for Romeo. With no outlet for those feelings, she would turn to the sky above and deliver a moving soliloquy.

Chifuyu's Juliet, however, wasn't talking about her family and her love being incompatible. *She* was soliloquizing about the pain of falling for an older man. *Her* heartfelt plea came from the perspective of a girl whose love was forbidden by society, the gap between her age and that of her beloved too large to

surmount.

“The only foe I see is the difference in our ages. You would be you, Romeo, even were you a child, and I would be me, even were I elder. A difference in our ages looms, yes—but what meaning is there in such a thing? Are we not ourselves, however much or however little time we’ve spent upon this earth? Do our feelings not remain true, no matter how long we’ve borne them?”

All that has form must someday cease to be. All worldly things are impermanent. All that prospers will someday decline. *Panta rhei*. Everything we know shifts and changes as time flows onward, and the heart of man is no less volatile. Like a popular anime that plunges from the height of acclaim to the depths of obscurity in just three years, and like Romeo’s feelings for Rosaline, so easily abandoned the moment he laid eyes on Juliet...people change. People’s feelings change. Nothing in this world is unchanging—not a thing.

Chifuyu, however, was rejecting reality’s fluid nature. She spoke of unchanging feelings—of everlasting love. It was a concept straight out of a fairy tale...and yet, her words felt all too real.

“O, Romeo, why must you fear the label of Lolicon?” Chifuyu continued. It was such an absurd line you’d think the audience would’ve cracked up at the sheer audacity of it all, but nobody so much as chuckled. Her words—and her charisma—carried the charm and sincerity to overwhelm a crowd ten thousand strong. “What meaning is there to a difference in age? Whether you were the same age as I, or whether you were old and decrepit, I would love you all the same. I beg of you, Romeo...overcome the barriers of age, reputation, and social standing. Surmount all obstacles, and grant me your love! The meaningless prejudices and biases you hold are not your flesh and blood—they are nothing to you, so cast them aside! Be rid of them, and take me in their place!”

“I take thee at thy word,” I said as I held a hand up toward Juliet. I let the irresistible, inexplicable, and fiery feelings that welled up within me take charge. “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized; henceforth I never will be Romeo!”

Up to that point, I had followed our script to the letter. From then on,

however, I'd be reading from my own script: a script for me, personally, not for Romeo. I would play myself. I'd play the me that I wanted to be—the me who exemplified my idea of what was cool—and I'd play him with every fiber of my being...just like everyone the whole world over played their own personal characters.

Maybe that meant I'd be putting on a persona. Maybe that persona would be nothing more than a lie—a work of purest fiction. But even if that were the case, I knew that it would be *genuine* fiction. After all, what could possibly be more genuine than striving to become the person you want to be?

“Your joy is my joy, and your sorrow my own in kind. If such is your wish, I shall shoulder the sin of degeneracy, stain my name with the title of Lolicon, and do it with a smile!”

Such was my vow as Himeki Chifuyu's knight—as Guiltia Sin Jurai. Such was the oath I had sworn to her long ago, and now swore anew.

As Chifuyu looked down at me from the balcony, a smile spread across her faintly flushed face. It was an expression that spoke of the joy of reuniting with the man she yearned for—and as for whether or not it was just part of her act...frankly, I couldn't tell, and I couldn't have cared less regardless. As long as she was smiling, I was as happy as I could possibly be.

“Romeo!”

“Juliet!”

With that, we stared deeply into each other's eyes, expressing a deep, profound love with our gazes alone.

The play moved forward at a steady pace. Sayumi managed to skillfully narrate around Chifuyu's digression from the script, covering up any continuity issues it brought about, and after the balcony scene drew to a close, we headed straight into the wedding scene, as officiated by Tomoyo's Sister Laurence.

The very next day, however, Romeo killed Tybalt, a Capulet, to avenge the death of his best friend, and he was swiftly exiled from Verona. Laurence, seeing Juliet stricken with grief, came up with the “feigning death by poison”

plan for her, and *tried* to communicate it to Romeo as well. Due to a bout of unfortunate happenstance, however, the letter detailing the plan never found its way to Romeo's hands. Juliet fell into a deep, deathlike sleep, and the Capulets arranged her funeral. Upon hearing the news, Romeo rushed back to Verona, fell into despair upon seeing his beloved's corpse, and poisoned himself, taking his own life.

"Ahaugh!" I coughed, acting as if I were hacking up a mouthful of blood, and collapsed on the spot. "Juli...et..." I muttered, my eyes drifting shut as I breathed my last in the same coffin as my beloved.

Mere moments later, Juliet began to rouse from her slumber. "Mnh..." she grunted as she sat up, awakening to a joyous future where she would cast off her social status and live with Romeo...or so she thought. Instead, all that greeted her was the cold, hard reality that her lover was dead.

"No! How can this be? Romeo... This is all my fault," Chifuyu said as she propped me up, cradling my body to hers.

Per the script as written, this is the part where Juliet would draw Romeo's sword and thrust it into her own breast, taking her life and leading the story to its tragic outcome...but this was where our spin on the tale would finally be revealed: Juliet would kiss Romeo, miraculously reviving him. It was an embarrassingly contrived twist to throw into the play, but at the same time, it was a twist that Chifuyu had thought up all by herself, and a twist that / at least thought was fantastic.

"Romeo, please...wake up, I beg of you," Chifuyu said. I was still playing dead, and she leaned in toward me, positioning her head in just the right way to pretend to kiss me without letting the audience see what was really going on—or at least, that was the plan.

I sat there, limp, eyes closed, waiting for the feigned kiss. The fact that I knew it wouldn't be real didn't stop it from being a little nerve racking...and that was the last thought that crossed my mind before, for a split second, my lips were sealed.

"Mmph?!"

Actually, scratch that. It wasn't a *split* second at all. It wasn't even a *single*

second. For a full three seconds or so, Chifuyu kept her lips pressed to mine. I spent those three seconds completely befuddled, the softness of her lips blotting out every other thought that tried to cross my rapidly liquefying mind.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Chifuyu reluctantly pulled away. I was still petrified from the shock of it all, and she took the chance to lean to my side and whisper, "I forgive you now," into my ear. "So? Aren't I an adult?" she added with a sly grin that the audience couldn't see, which was only slightly contrasted by the blush spreading across her face...not that I could talk, considering I knew for a fact that *my* face was a vivid shade of scarlet.



Huh? Huuuh? Did...Did Chifuyu just kiss me? In front of a whole crowd of people? W-W-Wait, no, seriously... That was straight-up my first kiss, actually! O-Oh god, what's even happening? My mind's going blank! What was I supposed to do next? Do I have any lines, or were we wrapping things up with narration...?

"A-A-And, And s-so, with a...with a k-k-kiss, Juliet brought Romeo back to life," said Sayumi. "The power of their love brought about a genuine miracle, and so moved were the Montagues and the Capulets, both houses decided..."

It seemed we were wrapping up with narration after all. As a sidenote, Chifuyu had kissed me from an angle that the audience wouldn't be able to see—that being, of course, an angle that would obscure the vision of anyone in *front* of us. That, by logical extension, meant that anyone to the *side* of us—say, in the wings of the stage or by the mic stand—had been able to see the whole thing from start to finish. In other words, Tomoyo, Hatoko, and Sayumi had almost definitely witnessed it all, which probably explained why Sayumi was stuttering through her narration with a look of consternation on her visibly flushed face. Tomoyo and Hatoko were blushing as well, by the way.

"...Thus did Romeo and Juliet live happily ever after. The end," Sayumi concluded. With that, all five of us made our way onto the stage, lined up, and took a bow on Sayumi's signal. The audience gave us a round of applause, and in spite of everything, our play ended on a successful note.

We'd gone through all sorts of mistakes and mishaps, both during our rehearsal period and during the performance itself, but in the end, we'd pulled together to put on a real play. I couldn't have been more pleased to see it, though I was a little *less* pleased to notice the red-faced, sidelong glares that the rest of the high schoolers in our crew were shooting me. For the time being, though, I decided to try to focus on the joy of wrapping up a proper performance instead.

Oh, that's right—I almost forgot. There's one last issue that I sorta let drop to the wayside unresolved: the question of our play's title.

We'd debated at one point whether we wanted to append some sort of

subtitle to *Romeo and Juliet*—"The New Testament," for instance—or otherwise shake up the title to reflect the spin we'd put on the play. Everything that'd happened with Chifuyu had torn our attention away from the question, however, and it had sat unresolved until it was too late to make any real decisions. We'd put plain old *Romeo and Juliet* on our pamphlet and signboard by default in the end. It wasn't exactly the most pressing issue to leave unresolved, and frankly I don't think anyone cared *that* much when all was said and done. That being said, it *did* end up reaching a conclusion in a totally unexpected fashion, shortly after the end of our first showing.

We'd set up a signboard for the play in the hallway outside of the music room, and *somebody* had decided to graffiti it after our performance had wrapped up. A club's setup getting defaced was the sort of thing that would normally send students running to the faculty...but when we saw what the culprit had written, we couldn't help but crack up about it in spite of ourselves. It was just such a perfectly on-point expression of our play's content that in the long run, we ended up adopting it as our official title. *I* was against it, for the record, but the girls came down in favor of the new title en masse, and I was ultimately overruled by majority vote.

Seriously, give me a break! I didn't know who was responsible for the graffiti (Okay, no, it was definitely Sagami. I mean, who else would pull a stunt like *that?*), but whoever it was, they'd certainly come up with the most scathing alteration possible. Specifically, they'd crossed out the first word of the title and written a *slightly* altered version above it—a version starting with the letter "L."

Yes, indeed. The final title of our play...was *Lolio and Juliet*.

Afterpiece

Lolicon: an abbreviated form of the term “lolita complex,” which itself refers to the phenomenon of harboring romantic or sexual interest in underage girls —“lolicon” can be used both adjectivally, to describe things which relate to such predilections, or nominally, to refer to those persons who experience these feelings. The word “lolita” is drawn from a novel of the same name, written by American author Vladimir Nabokov.

In the context of the novel, “Lolita” is the nickname the narrator gives to a twelve-year-old girl named Dolores Haze. That narrator, referred to as Humbert Humbert, is a college professor who still mourns the premature demise of his childhood love, a girl named Annabel Leigh. Humbert sees a resemblance between Dolores and the departed Annabel, and falls madly, obsessively in love with Dolores as a result. He refers to her as a “nymphet,” and, driven by his irresistible adoration of her...

“Ahhh, I’m exhausted,” I groaned. Our monumental first performance had come to an end, and I’d just finished changing out of my costume. At the moment, I was sitting cross-legged on a piece of cardboard we’d laid out on the floor of the music room’s prep chamber.

“Good work, Andou,” said Chifuyu.

“Thanks. You too,” I replied.

The two of us were the only ones left in the room, on account of our other three members having all been forced to leave to deal with their own tasks. Sayumi and Tomoyo were out in the music room proper, guiding visitors through our display, while Hatoko was helping out with her class’s project. They’d figured that Chifuyu and I would be especially tired since we play the starring roles, so they had scheduled a chunk of time for us to relax and rest up in between showings.

“So, not to spoil our break or anything, but, uhh, Chifuyu...? Wouldn’t you be

comfier somewhere else?” I asked.

“Nah,” replied Chifuyu. “I like it here. It’s relaxing.”

“*Really?*”

“Nowhere else is as good.”

I couldn’t exactly argue with that sort of confidence. Chifuyu was, at the moment, seated on my lap. Well, really, it was more like she was using my crossed legs as a full-on cushion. It was kind of impressive how well sized she was for it, actually.

“A perfect fit,” Chifuyu said with a satisfied air as she leaned back against me. I felt like I’d become a luxury sofa, and I did my best to adapt accordingly. Chifuyu had worked the hardest of anyone that day, and if that’s what it took to help her rest up, I was more than willing to play along.

“Hey, Chifuyu?” I said. “We’re supposed to have another showing first thing in the afternoon. Think you’ll be up for it?”

“Yeah,” Chifuyu grunted.

“Glad to hear it. Just, uh...don’t fall asleep this time, okay?”

“I know,” Chifuyu huffed.

I could understand why she’d be a little irritated by the request, but, like...this was a matter of life and death for me, okay? Who could blame me for being just a little bit paranoid? My imaginary battle with the Four Heavenly Guards and the mastermind who lurked behind them had carved a deep, indelible wound upon my heart.

“I wanted to see you try to do a somersault though.”

“*Please* don’t bring that up! All talk of my improvised acrobatic action show is *off* the table! I tried my best, but *no*! Somersault’s a taboo word from now on!”

“Hmph.”

“Taboo, I say! And speaking of things that are off the table...no actually kissing me next time, got it?” I said as I felt my face begin to grow a little warm.

The aftermath of *that* little incident had been a genuine disaster. The moment

the play had ended, Tomoyo, Hatoko, and Sayumi shot me the chilliest trio of glares I'd ever been subjected to. In contrast to their gazes, which measured somewhere around absolute zero, their cheeks had been a warm, rosy pink. Everyone—me included—had been thrown for a loop...well, everyone except for Chifuyu. *She'd* been pleased as punch. Anyway, the point is that just the thought of putting on another showing where things were *that* awkward was enough to give me a migraine.

"No more smooching? Why not?"

"*Because, that's why,*" I said, doing my best to make it clear that I was putting my foot down.

"Is it...because I'm a grade schooler?" Chifuyu asked, sounding a little sad.

I sighed. "No, that's not it. It has nothing to do with you being in grade school—it's just *embarrassing*, okay? I wouldn't do something like that in front of people, even if it *was* with someone I was dating. You get where I'm coming from, right?"

"Yeah..." Chifuyu agreed, though really, she still didn't seem totally convinced. I'd thought I was just talking common sense, but it might have come across as dismissive to her. "Hey, Andou? Are you really sure you don't wanna be a lolicon?" she asked. She sounded incredibly serious, so I decided that it was only fair to respond to her seriously as well.

"Heck no," I said. "I'm not a lolicon, and I don't want anyone to think I'm one either."

Chifuyu just sat there silently on my lap, so I decided to carry on.

"Hey, Chifuyu—do you know where the word 'lolicon' comes from?" I asked. Chifuyu shook her head. "It's an abbreviation of the phrase 'lolita complex.' *Lolita's* the title of a novel from overseas. It's about...okay, this is a *really* rough summary, but it's about some forty-something-year-old dude who falls in love with a twelve-year-old girl."

"So, the main character's a lolicon?"

"Right," I said with a nod. Technically speaking, it was less that Humbert was a lolicon and more that people with a sexual fixation on little girls *like* Humbert's

had come to be called lolicons, but that didn't really matter in the moment. "And there's this word that comes up in the book—'nymphet.'"

"Nymphet?"

"Right. It's supposed to refer to girls from nine to fourteen years old, and particularly ones who display traits that attract people to them."

That range of ages, according to Humbert, represented a period in which girls weren't *too* young, but were still by no means adults, thus granting them an irresistible erotic charm. He takes to calling them "nymphets" in the story, and he's so passionate about them he loses all sense of self-control.

"The way I understand it, the people we call lolicons are people who're drawn to 'nymphets.' So, if people are into girls from nine to fourteen years old—I mean, I guess the ages don't really need to be *that* specific? Point is, if people have strong feelings toward girls who're still not done developing yet, that makes them lolicons."

"..."

"Do you see where I'm going with this, Chifuyu? Lolicons are obsessed with girls in the *process* of growing up. The fact that they *aren't* fully developed is the whole point. In other words, no matter how sincere and zealous they are about their feelings...the moment the girl they're fixated on grows up, I figure all those feelings vanish away in an instant."

"Ah!" Chifuyu gasped.

A lolicon is defined by their attraction to little girls. To *true* lolicons, little girls were likely downright sacred...but that sanctity had an expiration date. When a little girl ceased to be little—as time passed by and they matured in a physical and psychological sense, their distinctively youthful features fading away—they also ceased to be special in a lolicon's eyes, degrading into just another bog-standard *woman* in the crowd. In my mind, an emotion like that—an emotion that could fade in a split second—wasn't worthy of being called "love."

"So, what do you think, Chifuyu? How do you feel about guys who claim to fall genuinely in love with grade schoolers, only to suddenly lose all interest in them the second they turn fifteen? Is that the sort of guy you'd want to be around?"

“No! That’s the worst!” Chifuyu said with a vigorous shake of her head. “I get it. Lolicons are lame. Lolicons suck. Lolicons are awful. Lolicons are just plain bad!”

Chifuyu turned to look over her shoulder, gazing up at me with a look of earnest desperation in her eyes.

“Stop being a lolicon, Andou!”

“...That’ll be tough, considering I never was one to begin with. I told you that way back when this all started, remember?”

“Oh. Right.”

“I’m not a lolicon, so even if I *did* fall for a girl who was way younger than me, I wouldn’t give up on her out of nowhere when she grew up. Even when she got into middle school, or turned twenty, or hit middle age, or became an old grandma, I’d still love her as much as ever. That’s the kind of guy I want to be, anyway,” I said. I did my best to give her the answer I’d failed to provide three days before.

“Yeah, I know. You’re not a lolicon,” said Chifuyu. “You’re just Andou.”

Chifuyu sounded as happy and satisfied as could be, and hearing her sound like that made *me* feel all warm and fuzzy in return.

“Hey, Andou?”

“Yeah?”

“Pay me back for the kiss.”

“Pfff!”

That came from so far out of left field I literally choked. I’m talking *full-on* spit take.

“I gave you my first, so I want you to pay me back,” Chifuyu said.

“I mean...that was *my* first too, for one thing. And, like...u-umm... Oh jeez, what am I even supposed to *do* here?”

Is this, like...shotgun wedding material? Should I be introducing myself to her parents when they come to see the afternoon show? Or maybe I should ask for

Kuki's blessing first? I wondered, practically trembling with terror, but...

"I want a squeeze."

...it turned out that what Chifuyu wanted was surprisingly simple.

"A...squeeze? You mean, like, you want me to hug you?"

"Yeah. I want a squeeze, from behind."

"Uh... But, like...?"

"I've been sleeping in cramped places lately. It's my thing."

"O-Oooh, okay, I think I get it now. Basically, you want me to help you nap, right?"

If *that* was the point, I figured there wasn't anything indecent about the request after all, probably. In fact, helping Chifuyu sleep soundly seemed like a perfectly humane and decent thing to do, so I wrapped my arms around her and gave her the hug she wanted...though it *kinda* ended up feeling more like a pin than a hug, if I'm being honest. She was just so tiny, it turned out that way naturally.

"W-Well? How's this?" I asked.

"Mnh," Chifuyu grunted. "It's nice. A perfect fit."

"Glad to hear it. Feel free to drift off whenever you feel like it."

"I...don't think I can sleep. I feel kinda hot."

"Oh? I mean, I guess you would be, all things considered. Wanna give up on the nap-hug, then?"

"No!" Chifuyu yelped. I'd started to let her go, but she grabbed onto my arms and held them in place. "I'll stay like this."

"Uh..."

"It's not my body that's hot...so I'm fine...like this," Chifuyu muttered, so quietly it felt like her voice might fade away altogether. I was holding her from behind, of course, so I had no way of knowing what sort of look was on her face as she said it.

I kept holding her for some time, though Chifuyu never quite managed to fall asleep. Eventually, I started feeling a little mischievous and rested my chin on the top of her head. That must've tickled, since Chifuyu let out a little shudder, then she got payback by gently scratching my thigh, making it *my* turn to squirm. There we sat, in the tiny, narrow room, as friendly and affectionate as a pair of siblings. Or, perhaps, a family. Or extended relatives. Or, just maybe...like a couple in love.

Afterword

So, I'm an author, more or less. Making up stories—in a word, fiction—is literally my job, so, to tell the truth, I've always had a really hard time filling this space—that is to say, the afterword. I write fiction because I *don't* want to write using my own voice, and some part of me has always wondered why I have to fill a section with the exact sort of writing I want to avoid each and every volume.

Be that as it may, I definitely can't claim that everything I say in these sections is always my absolute, one hundred percent pure and true opinion. This goes without saying, but there are some things that you just *can't* say, period, and I try to keep that in mind and not rock any boats too strongly when I write these bits. Or, to put it more bluntly, I put on a persona. I assume the mantle of Kota Nozomi, the author, and act out his part as if he were a character in a play. I do my damndest to think about how I want to be seen by my readers, and I write my afterwords with those thoughts in mind.

Of course, in a certain sense, that's all obvious. Every member of our society puts on a persona in that sort of way from time to time. There really aren't any places where we can let out our hundred percent genuine selves—our *true* selves—and for that matter, I have my doubts about whether “true selves” are even something we have to begin with. Like, what, is the idea that we all put on personas whenever there are people around to observe us, and our true selves would only emerge if everyone else on Earth vanished and we no longer *needed* to hide them away? I sure don't want to think that's true, anyway.

With all that said, this is Kota Nozomi! When I first started writing this eighth volume, I figured I'd theme it around that whole dilemma of putting on personas and finding your true self, expressing those concepts through a story centered around the theater and making it *super* philosophical and stuff...but then, somewhere along the way, I took a sharp left turn into “Okay, but what if it was about grade schoolers instead?” territory, where the story would ultimately remain.

This is a story of a girl who hangs around in an unusual place like it's perfectly natural, who makes the people she's with wish what had come perfectly naturally for her could remain perfectly natural for them, even after they've realized that it is, in fact, anything but. It also feels like a story that's taken that girl—as well as our protagonist—and led the two of them to their own personal starting lines.

Apropos of nothing, some announcements! At this particular moment (that being October 2014), the *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* anime is currently mid broadcast. I hope you've been watching it!

Next, some thanks. To my editor: honestly, seriously, thank you for everything. And to 029: thank you once again for drawing such wonderful illustrations. And finally, to all the readers who've stuck around for eight volumes, I offer my greatest and most sincere of thank-yous.

That's all for now! May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

KOTA NOZOMI PRESENTS★★★
ILLUSTRATOR: 029



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Bonus Translation Notes: On Voice

Out of all the many, *many* potential tidbits one could take away from this volume, one stands out above all else when it comes to subjects worth writing a TL note section about: the fact that if a character suddenly starts speaking in something other than their usual, previously defined voice, it can be really, *really* jarring! Convincing Chifuyu to go back to her usual, non-Disney-ified tone and register was a onetime deal for Andou, but for a translator, keeping dialogue constantly on point and in character is more or less a never-ending struggle. Considering that this volume touches on that topic, that the volume themes itself so strongly around the theater, and that this means I *won't* have to touch certain *other* topics this volume uses as themes, I think this is the perfect opportunity to talk a little about how establishing and maintaining individual characters' voices works from a localization perspective!

To start, I figure I should probably explain a little more clearly what I actually mean when I refer to a character's "voice"! I'm not talking about audible voices, obviously—rather, I'm referring to how a character's dialogue comes across to the reader and informs their perspective regarding that character's, well, character. Or, to put it differently, how that character's voice should sound in a reader's head as they read their dialogue! Tons of different factors play a role in determining how a character's voice comes across, and all of them have to be carefully and deliberately considered while translating.

With that established, a question naturally follows: how does one go about determining how a character's voice should sound in translation? The answer to *that* question is where things start getting complicated, because really, there is no single answer. Figuring out what sort of voices to give the characters in a story, and how to portray those voices once you have them determined, can be one of the hardest parts of picking up a new project in this field (or at least, it is for me, anyway!).

The starting point, at least, is pretty simple: you just read the text and get a feel for how the character sounds in their original language. It goes without

saying that Japanese is just as capable of portraying character voice as any other language, and to an extent, carrying over aspects of a character's voice from the original text directly into the translated version is often possible and desirable! If, say, a character consistently speaks in rhyme in the original text (not as out-there as you might think), then that's almost certainly an aspect of their voice that you'll want to carry through in your translated rendition. One of my personal favorite examples of this sort of thing is *Final Fantasy VIII*'s Fujin, who speaks exclusively in short, nongrammatical kanji compounds in Japanese, which the translators chose to render as her speaking in single-word, fully capitalized phrases (“怒 !”, for instance, becoming “RAGE!”). Unfortunately, however, it's not always quite that simple.

Two ways in which a character could make determining their English voice harder come immediately to mind: when a character's Japanese voice features a quirk or characteristic that either doesn't have an English equivalent or would come across entirely differently if used directly; or when a character simply doesn't *have* any super distinctive, standout quirks and mostly just talks like a regular person. A good example of the former would be when characters habitually speak in the third person, a trait that (broadly) comes across as childlike in Japanese but makes characters sound either conceited, unhinged, or possibly both in English. The latter feels fairly self-explanatory—when there are no clear or major distinguishing factors you can carry over from a character's Japanese voice, you have to really start digging into the subtleties of said voice instead.

That, incidentally, is more or less the solution to those potential pitfalls: when you need to portray a character's voice but the original language doesn't provide an immediately usable means to do so, you have to start probing the subtleties of that character's character and come to an understanding of how they *would* speak, if they happened to be an English speaker! Take, for instance, the third-person example again: if it's clear that the trait is intended to come across as childish, then the most faithful way to portray it would be to ensure that other aspects of the character's speech carry that same connotation.

As for characters who speak fairly normally, all you have to do is figure out how a fairly normal person who shares that character's traits would speak, then

write them accordingly! Of course, that “all you have to do” is carrying a lot of weight—it’s *much* easier said than done, especially when you have multiple characters who all speak like fairly normal people but all need to have distinctive voices. *Supernatural Battles* happens to be a series that poses that precise problem, so I figure we might as well use it to provide some examples! Conveniently enough, this volume marks a very handy milestone for that purpose: it’s the first volume to feature a sequence written from Chifuyu’s perspective, meaning it’s also the first opportunity we have to discuss the narrative voices that we used for the full core cast of the series!

To start in the most obvious place, let’s talk about the voice of our first and most prominent narrator: Andou. Andou, in a phrase, contains multitudes. On the one hand you have his almost manic, chuuni-riffic persona, constantly ready and willing to crack a quip or drop a reference, but on the other hand you have those (actually fairly frequent) moments where he gets *really* introspective and serious, stripping away his usual layers of pretense and betraying a lot more careful consideration than he usually lets on. One of the most important factors in feeling out Andou’s voice for us was making sure that it would remain consistent through those two distinct modes—it had to still *feel* like Andou in any given moment, whether he was being ridiculous-edgy or actually-pretty-serious-edgy.

What, then, could distinguish Andou’s voice in a way that could carry throughout all his moods and persona shifts? To start, a trait that we’ve adapted from one of Andou’s distinctive traits in Japanese: his tendency to use unnecessarily complicated and obscure kanji to write otherwise very simple words! That habit is one hundred percent a manifestation of his chuuni tendencies, and we chose to render it—and in doing so distinguish his voice—by making him occasionally use vocabulary that’s flowery to a comically unnecessary degree. The same for his phrasings, really—the goal was to make sure that you could always tell that Andou was in charge of narration duties because he’s just so *extra* about it. Other aspects of Andou’s voice include him being mostly casual with his speech, aside from circumstances that call for formality, and him being relatively low on the likely-to-casually-swear spectrum.

Next up: the Sagami-endorsed main heroine, Tomoyo! Out of all the literary

club girls, Tomoyo's character voice comes the closest to resembling Andou's in a fair number of ways, which is both inconvenient since it makes distinguishing the two of them harder, but is also only logical from a storytelling perspective considering their shared interests and (however much Tomoyo would deny it) shared personality traits. Although the fundamentals of their voices are rather similar—a tendency to lean toward casual phrasings and a tendency to talk in memes and media references, for instance—Tomoyo's carries a note of exasperation that you don't really see so much in Andou's. She's a little more blunt—even harsh, at times—with her phrasings, and is much more likely to swear than Andou, on the whole. She's also a little more direct and less flowery with her narration, though she *does* occasionally slip back into old habits and ham it up chuuni-style on occasion as well.

Moving on to the heroine of volume 2, Hatoko is far and away the most normal member of the main cast, both in terms of personality and character voice. That's not necessarily the most helpful guideline when it comes to making a character talk in a distinctive manner, but the fact that the rest of the club members have such big personalities means that, to an extent, Hatoko's relative lack of major quirks makes her quirky in her own right. She's both the resident normie and also the most consistently nice and polite member of the main cast, though notably she's *not* polite in a formal sort of way, and she speaks just as casually as Andou and Tomoyo, albeit in a distinctly different tone.

Fourth on the docket is Sayumi, who has been perhaps the easiest member of the main cast to establish a distinctive voice for. Essentially, if Hatoko is supposed to come across as polite but not formal, then Sayumi is meant to come across as formal but not polite. Her speech and narration both have a distinctive stiffness to them that none of the other literary members come even close to touching—she's very unlikely to use slang or casual phrasings unless in a very deliberate capacity, and her vocabulary is elevated in a way that (hopefully!) makes her come across as erudite (rather than as a pretentious tryhard like Andou). In contrast to her formality, Sayumi is also downright *scathing*, and coming up with phrasings that let her verbally eviscerate Andou without ever dropping her elevated, formal demeanor makes her speech and narration especially fun for me to work on.

Last but not least, our newest and in many ways most distinctive narrator: Chifuyu! Some aspects of Chifuyu’s voice—such as her somewhat fragmented sentence structure and general brevity—are very easy to carry over, while others—such as her use of the third person (yeah, that aside wasn’t even remotely hypothetical)—take a lot more effort to convey in English. Chifuyu’s voice should ideally come across as simultaneously childlike and *extremely* precocious, which we’ve tried to represent by having her largely use direct, simple phrasings and childish expressions (“housewifeyness” being a good example), but at the same time not shy away from dropping big words or elaborate ideas when the moment calls for them (as it does at several times during her description of her quest for the ultimate bed).

And, I think that’s about all the space we have for this section! We’ve put plenty of thought into the voices of the B-cast as well, from how Kudou’s brand of formality contrasts with Sayumi’s to the varying degrees of roughness and rudeness among the members of *Fallen Black*, but I think you more or less get the core idea that I’m trying to convey: that portraying a character’s voice in translation is, at its core, all about *knowing* the character as well as you possibly can and making them speak in the manner they *would* speak in under any given circumstance, while simultaneously maintaining constant faithfulness to the original text. If that sounds a little esoteric and vague...well, it kinda is! That’s just one of the many reasons why media translation is more of an art than a science, and why there are very few translation challenges that have singular, objectively correct solutions. That’s what makes it such a fascinating field, in my view—though, I mean, I *would* say that, wouldn’t I?

Anyway, it’s time for a whooole buncha pop culture references in need of contextualization! Let’s jump right in!

Scene 1

△ *The magus of space... Wait, no, that sounds too much like the sort of title they give to the expert architects in those home remodeling shows.*

In the original text, Andou fairly explicitly references a very specific Japanese home remodeling program! The show, which is titled *Daikaizou! Gekiteki Before*

After (or, according to the English featured on its logo, *That'S a DRAMATIC CHANGE!*) focuses on the remodeling of old, run-down, or otherwise inconvenient homes. Each episode opens with an introduction of the home and its inhabitants, explaining the problem the inhabitants have with the home and how it impacts and worsens their lives. Then, once the stakes are established, the show brings in an expert to remodel the home and solve all its inhabitants' woes.

The experts in question are where the connection to Andou's little ramble come into play, on account of the fact that the show gives each one a dramatic intro shot of them walking up toward the house, complete with a title card and the show's theme music (which sounds like a track straight out of a JRPG and is titled, I kid you not, "Inscrutable Battle." Seriously, I'm not making that up—it's easy to find on YouTube and I highly recommend that you do so). They're also given titles that somehow reflect their specialties, and those titles are, if I may say so myself, *extremely* chuuni. Examples include "The Wizard of Light," "The Heir of Ancient Knowledge," and "The Adventurer of the Third Dimension." It's all just so gloriously extra, and Andou isn't wrong in the sense that the first title he comes up with for Chifuyu would fit right in among their ranks.

△ *I based it, of course, off the words of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus: panta rhei, that is, "everything flows"!*

When Andou says *ancient* Greek, he means it: Heraclitus lived in the sixth century BC, and as a natural result, what little we know about him is vague and unreliable, taken largely from the questionably sourced writings of the biographer Diogenes Laërtius (not to be confused with Diogenes the Cynic, ancient Greece's most notorious trash-gremlin). His work has been largely lost to time as well, with the only remaining instances of his writings being quotations found in the work of other philosophers, many of whom apparently found his ideas to be obscure and confusing even way back then.

△ *...the final paradise of the soul, Tír na nÓg!*

Tír na nÓg is one of the many names for a sort of afterlife as represented in Irish mythology. I say "a sort of afterlife" because it's not *really* that simple—it's

more of a mythical realm populated by gods and legendary heroes, though, of course, the specifics vary from legend to legend. One has to assume that Andou chose to reference it largely because it has a very cool name.

△ *That's canon, by the way—it's in a fan book called FMA Research Lab DX.*

It really is! The fan book in question was written by Arakawa Hiromu, the creator of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, but it has never been published in English in any capacity and is rather hard to get ahold of these days. What few excerpts of its content can be found online show that it contains interviews, question and answer sections, character profiles, and a bunch of silly sketch comics featuring characters from the series.

△ *...and Natsu Dragneel didn't eat his own fire as well.*

Natsu Dragneel is a main character in *Fairy Tail*, a *Weekly Shonen Magazine* manga by Mashima Hiro. Natsu is a mage with fire-themed powers who can replenish his energy by consuming fire, unless he's the one who made it.

△ *Make like Doraemon with his Time Cloth and zap it till it's good as new!*

The Time Cloth (or possibly Time Kerchief, if you're watching the anime dubbed) is a classic gadget from *Doraemon*! It allows the user to fast-forward or rewind the timeline of whatever they happen to lay it on, enabling all sorts of wacky shenanigans and mishaps—or enabling the user to fix broken stuff, if you're being practical about it.

△ *...I found myself screaming at it to "Just heat up already!" with all the passion of former tennis player turned motivational speaker Matsuoka Shuzou.*

After retiring from the pro tennis world in 1998, Matsuoka Shuzou moved on to being a sports commentator, then he started releasing his now iconic series of motivational videos in the mid '00s. The videos are characterized by Matsuoka's almost aggressive enthusiasm and positivity, as well as the sometimes inexplicable settings he films them in (with one particularly well-

known example involving him delivering a motivational speech while collecting clams in subfreezing ocean water—search “Matsuoka Shuzou never give up” on YouTube if you want to see it for yourself). Needless to say, the videos became instant meme-bait, with clips and remixes of Matsuoka’s speeches circulating on Nico Nico ever since. To his credit, Matsuoka seems to have taken his internet fame in stride and has pretty much just kept doing his thing.

△ *I’m sorry, I missed the part where we became a Kagerou Project spin-off!*

Kagerou Project is a mixed-media franchise that began with a series of Vocaloid songs composed by a music producer known as Jin! The series began with a song called “Jinzou Enemy,” but is most commonly known for its third song and the series’ namesake, “Kagerou Daze.”

Summarizing the story of *Kagerou Project* even in short form is, frankly, way beyond the scope of this notes section, in no small part on account of the fact that as of the moment I’m writing this, it spans a bare minimum of twenty (arguably upward of thirty) songs, eight novels, thirteen volumes of manga, and an anime, all of which—as Andou alludes to—drift in and out of different continuities and feature mutually exclusive endings and plot developments...and that’s not even *starting* on the fan-made content!

The story involves eye-based superpowers, a hyperadvanced AI of dubious origins, multiple time loops, oodles of trauma, and at least one monster straight out of Greek mythology. If I’m making it sound both unapproachable and like, well, a *lot*, that’s because it honestly kind of is, but I’d still definitely recommend taking a look if any of this sounds intriguing to you. I highly recommend giving “Kagerou Daze” a listen, at the absolute least—it’s a certifiable classic in the Vocaloid scene, and also a bop.

Scene 2

△ *Should I have called it the Lemegeton instead of a grimoire?*

The *Lemegeton* is one of several names for *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, a seventeenth-century grimoire that gets alluded to all the time in the sort of media that Andou eats up. The text itself is a compilation of other older texts,

and was likely inspired by an earlier grimoire called the *Key of Solomon*. Numerous editions and translations have been published over the years, one of them by the infamous Aleister Crowley himself.

△ *Like the Book of Eibon, or the Pnakotic Manuscripts...?*

The *Book of Eibon* and the *Pnakotic Manuscripts* are both texts from the Cthulhu Mythos, as Andou notes, though only the *Pnakotic Manuscripts* were the creation of H.P. Lovecraft! The *Book of Eibon* was referenced by Lovecraft on numerous occasions, but was created by Clark Ashton Smith, one of Lovecraft's contemporaries and friends. Both books are grimoires, and it's worth noting that the *Pnakotic Manuscripts* were the very first fictional grimoire that Lovecraft wrote about, originating in his short story "Polaris."

△ *...it's like, y'know, the same sorta mindset that got Ash to give up his Charizard, I guess...*

Ash's relationship with his Charizard in the *Pokémon* anime is a rather dramatic one, largely thanks to the Pokémon's chronic attitude problem. The extended plot arc culminates with Ash leaving Charizard behind for the sake of both of their personal growths. This was a pretty big moment in the history of the anime, since at that point Charizard had been part of the team for the vast majority of the show's run (which at the time totaled over a hundred episodes).

△ *Find out after the commercial break!*

The particular phrasing used in this line was popularized by the staggeringly popular anime adaptation of *Chibi Maruko-chan*, a manga by Sakura Momoko about a mischievous little girl and her family. The anime has been running constantly since 1995, and it currently boasts somewhere in the vicinity of a thousand five hundred episodes. Its characters and their trademark phrases are downright iconic, and its "to be continued after the commercials" phrase has been parodied and spoofed to the point that it's all but taken on a life of its own.

Scene 3

△ *In this era of Verona's history, noble houses were divided based upon their support of either the Holy Roman emperor or the pope. The Montagues are supporters of the emperor, while the Capulets side with the pope...*

Although this bit of *Romeo and Juliet* lore isn't commonly brought up (outside of Japan, anyway), it *does* actually have a degree of historical basis! To make a long and complicated story short, some sources tie the conflict between the Capulets and the Montagues as depicted in the play to the real-world conflict between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, which dated back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. *That* conflict more or less matches up with Andou's description, with the Guelphs supporting the pope and the Ghibellines supporting the emperor. There were, by all accounts, real-world families called the Capulets and the Montagues who were supposedly involved in this conflict (both of which were referenced in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which we've covered in previous notes sections).

△ ...*"Snow White," "Cinderella," "Momotarou"...*

Snow White and Cinderella are likely familiar to most of our readers, but Momotarou is potentially less so! Momotarou is the main character and namesake of a classic Japanese folktale, the title of which is sometimes rendered as "Peach Boy." That title's rather apt, since the story begins with baby Momotarou emerging from a giant peach that his adoptive parents, an elderly couple, find floating down a river. Momotarou grows up to become a capable warrior, and he eventually journeys out to Onigashima, an island infested with oni, to defeat its inhabitants. Along the way, he bribes and befriends various animals, including a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant, all of whom aid him in his quest. In the end, he topples the oni and returns home victorious. As Andou implies, *Momotarou* is a very common choice for school plays, though mostly for younger casts and audiences.

△ *Not just Shakespeare either—it worked with Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Pascal, Ortega, Thomas Aquinas, Dazai Osamu, even the Bible!*

Some of these names are a lot more obscure than others, but in the interest of time and fairness, I'll be covering all of them equally briefly! Friedrich Nietzsche was a philosopher from the nineteenth century who is deeply associated with the philosophy of nihilism and who we've discussed in previous sections. Søren Kierkegaard was also a philosopher, deeply associated with the existentialist movement. Pascal—surprise surprise—was a philosopher too, though from an earlier era and known just as much, if not more so, for his work in the field of mathematics. José Ortega y Gasset was... Y'know what, I'm just going to start noting the ones who *weren't* philosophers. Gasset was Spanish, and his philosophy was rather political and advocated for liberalism. Thomas Aquinas takes us way back in time again to the thirteenth century, and his work, centered largely around Christian theology, got him sainted by the Catholic Church. Next, at long last, we have our (perhaps debatable) first nonphilosopher, Dazai Osamu, a Japanese novelist known for extremely influential stories such as *No Longer Human*, some of which have been referenced by previous Supernatural Battles volumes. Last, but not least, the Bible is neither a philosopher nor a person at all, but rather a collection of texts held to be sacred by a number of prominent religions.

△ *I'm talking JoJo's Part 5 levels of pacing here.*

The fifth arc of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, somewhat notoriously, canonically takes place in its entirety over the course of nine days. Considering the sheer amount of stuff that happens in the arc (not to mention the sheer number of injuries its characters sustain and recover from), "bizarre" kinda fails to do the pacing justice. For context, Part 5 was 155 chapters long—compare that to Part 4, which was just 19 chapters longer and took place over the course of four *months*.

△ *They spoil the scene where Clara stands up in Heidi, Girl of the Alps, they spoil the scene where Nello dies in Dog of Flanders, they spoil the big confession of love in Touch, and they spoil the "He stole your heart" scene in The Castle of Cagliostro!*

Time for some much more specific classic anime spoilers! *Heidi, Girl of the*

Alps is the rather legendary anime adaptation of the novel *Heidi*, which in turn was written in the late nineteenth century by Johanna Spyri. In both versions of the story, Clara is a girl who is forced to use a wheelchair on account of a case of rickets. She befriends the titular Heidi, and eventually manages to overcome her condition and walk on her own toward the end of the series.

Dog of Flanders is another classic anime adaptation of a European novel, this time written by Marie Louise de la Ramée under the pen name Ouida, which famously ends with the death of its main character, Nello, and his dog, Patrasche. *Touch*, in contrast, is a manga-original story! Created by Adachi Mitsuru, it centers around a pair of twin brothers who vie for the affection of their childhood friend while also doing baseball stuff. Its anime adaptation is something of a classic as well, and it ran for 101 episodes in the '80s.

Finally, *The Castle of Cagliostro* is a film in the ever-famous Lupin III franchise! *Cagliostro* is especially famous even by Lupin standards, largely on account of being the theatrical directorial debut of one Miyazaki Hayao, who would go on to become perhaps the single most acclaimed director in anime history. The “He stole your heart” scene refers to an iconic line spoken by Zenigata, a police inspector and Lupin’s persistent nemesis.

△ Y’know how that one tutoring company used Heidi as their mascot for a while?

The tutoring company in question is called Trygroup Inc. It was founded in 1987, and is still in operation. The Heidi promotion that Andou refers to began in 2012, and initially involved a version of *Heidi*’s opening sequence edited to include a Japanese businessman in a suit, who represented the company. The promotion continues to this day, though it’s gotten *real* weird in the intervening years, with the most recent Heidi tutoring ad I managed to track down involving Heidi standing on top of a Japanese skyscraper and singing about the company’s AI-assisted teaching methodologies while her grandfather plays a synthesizer in the background. Yes, I realize how fake that sounds, but I swear to god I’m not making it up—you can search “シンガーハイジ” on YouTube and see for yourself, if you’re curious and/or brave enough.

Scene 5

△ *I don't have a mouth in my midsection! I'm not Bemstar, for crying out loud!*

Bemstar is a kaiju from the *Ultraman* franchise, originating in its fourth entry, *Return of Ultraman*, which aired in 1971! A consistent feature of Bemstar's design is the relatively small, pentagonal mouth on its midsection, which is what Andou's alluding to.

△ *"Common sense to assume stuff hidden under loose clothes!"*

Feitan—the character who Andou quickly explains he's quoting—is an antagonist from *Hunter x Hunter*, known for his skill as a torturer and his grammatically awkward, stilted manner of speaking.

Scene 6

△ *It was also sure to guarantee that the character would be handsome under the mask—well, Gein aside, anyway.*

In this context, Gein refers to an antagonist from *Rurouni Kenshin*! Gein constantly wears a mask throughout the majority of his appearances in the series, but said mask is eventually broken, revealing him to be a rather shriveled old man.

△ *Like Tuxedo Mask!*

Tuxedo Mask is a mask and tuxedo-clad love interest in Takeuchi Naoko's *Sailor Moon*! Though he's definitely a heartthrob in the context of the series, aspects of Tuxedo Mask's character—from his outfit, to his persona, to his tendency to enter and exit the scene out of nowhere—can come across as, well...a bit dorky, from a certain perspective (a perspective it seems likely Tomoyo shares).

△ *If I had to describe it in short, I guess I'd made it look a little like Kurei's*

mask in Flame of Recca?

Flame of Recca is a manga created by Anzai Nobuyuki! The manga ran from 1995 to 2002, and it was adapted into an anime series that ran from 1997 to 1998. Kurei is initially an antagonist who wears a mostly flat, white mask with a single eye hole on its left side and four large, painted-on yellow eyes on the right.

△ Since when did putting a mask on make you scream your head off? It's not like it's made out of stone or anything!

This is, of course, a *JoJo's* reference, shouting out the stone mask that turns Dio into a vampire at the beginning of Part 1!

△ Oh, and it makes you look sorta like an Arrancar too.

The Arrancar are a type of being in *Bleach*! Specifically, they're Hollows who have managed to remove their masks, gaining tremendous powers in the process. Presumably due to the mask removal theme, most of the Arrancar have partial or broken masks worked into their character designs.

△ People don't power up by eating other people, assuming they aren't ghouls!

This line is in reference to *Tokyo Ghoul*, a manga by Ishida Sui! In the context of that series, ghouls are humanlike creatures who can't eat anything other than human flesh, and they gain supernatural strength—and sometimes powers—upon doing so.

△ Just as I decided to ask Sayumi where that old ritual came from...

The origins of the old ritual in question are somewhat unclear! Some sources claim that writing the character for “person” three times in your hand represents the audience, and swallowing them helps minimize their presence in your mind, while others try to justify the practice using more complicated plays on words. It's just one of those things that's been around for so long that it's

hard to say definitively what brought it about to begin with.

Scene 8

△ *There was another, ultimate guard pulling the strings of the Four Heavenly Guards this whole time, and now I have to fight him too?!*

The Four Heavenly Kings (or Guards) is a very long-standing and widespread trope in Japanese fiction! This isn't even the first time it's come up in this series, as it so happens—the literary club girls formed a Heavenly Kings set in the video game they made for Andou back in volume 4, as well. The source of the trope, as well as its most common go-to translation, traces back to entities from Buddhist theology who are believed to watch over the world, each one representing a cardinal direction of north, south, east, or west. The term shows up just about everywhere in media these days, with perhaps the most accessible example being the Elite Four from *Pokémon*.

...And, that's all for now! As always, I'll see you in the next volume!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 8

This one time when I was a student, I had a very rare opportunity to actually talk with a girl. The subject at hand: animals.

Girl: "You know, I really hate frogs! Do you have any animals you just can't stand?"

Nozomi: "I suppose I can't stand...*humans*. (/obnoxious smirk)"

Illustrator: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part-Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works), *Dragon Lies* (Published by Shogakukan), and *The 8th Cafeteria Girl* (Published by Shueisha).

There's just *no* way that a bridal carry like that can be good for you! A hopeless future of lower back pain awaits!

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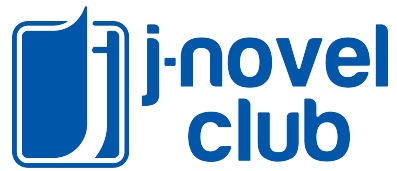
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When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace: Volume 8

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by Kota Nozomi

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